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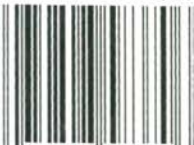
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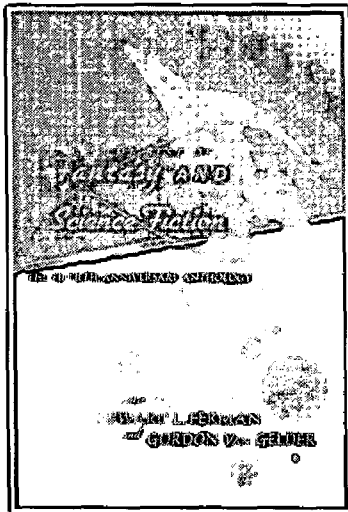


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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction

March • Lucius Shepard Issue

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Our special single-author issues have characteristically opened with the centerpiece story. But seeing as how we haven't published one of these issues in more than a decade, breaking with tradition seemed like a minor transgression, and this piece from the author of Geek Love sets the stage perfectly.

An Introduction to Lucius Shepard

By Katherine Dunn

SO FAR AS I CAN TELL, LUCIUS Shepard writes what he is and is what he writes. The many voices of his work — the rhythms and stances of the clinical observer, sardonically twisted wit, enraged cynic, brilliant brooding doubter, keening griever after beauty or at least dignity, humble straight talker, and of course, the thunder — are all his voice. These and all their possible permutations are ways he talks, joking or mortally serious, over a beer or the phone in a bluesy baritone that slides to whiskey bass depending on his mood.

He has the size and general demeanor of a sophisticated Grizzly chuckling mournfully over the omen bones of his latest kill. But he does not rear up in social situations unless riled. In fact he tries to diminish the threat of his physical presence. He stays seated, hunches in and speaks softly, smiling occasionally so as not to petrify the frail bipeds.

He's described himself as looking like a big old biker, and that's true enough, with the beard and ponytail and the scraggy denims. But there is a calm about him that comes with being too big for anybody sane to mess with.

There are nutcases, naturally, and fools to fray his patience. Drunks, such as the curse-spewing driver who plowed into Shepard's parked car outside a boxing arena one night and then tried to punch him, wake up in the nearest Dumpster.

Shepard will tell you he rarely gets into fights anymore — but he's a savage duelist with verbs at ten paces, or adjectival phrases in cyberspace. While these performances can be hilariously entertaining even distant noncombatants may wobble away with singed eyebrows. A large corporation once tried to hire him to flame pests on their web sites but he decided against such abuse of his gift for invective. Shepard strives to use his powers for good.

He's a complicated guy. In a given season he may be ferally reclusive, a suavely mesmerizing raconteur, an eloquently generous teacher, and as funny a pal as ever shared a forty-ouncer in the bleachers. Then he sees some sign of the end times, some flagrant violation of his fierce sense of what's right, and he dives into grim fury.

He's holed up writing for months on end in some musky, rubble-heaped hermitage, then suddenly he's slamming latitudes and time zones in frenetic travel.

The word drifts in. He's on the Mexican border researching something weird and mailing macabre memorabilia to select acquaintances. He's doing readings in Manhattan. He's hopping freight trains on the track of a homicidal hobo brotherhood. Or he's somewhere in the big trees, visiting eco-radicals in their bosky bowers. He's in Montana hanging out with the elephant trainers of a one-ring circus, and freshening his fluent Spanish. He's trying to get into Honduras to find out whether old friends survived a hurricane. He's locked himself into a tiny airstream travel trailer in a backyard in Monterey and won't come out till his work is finished. And that's just the last year or so.

I first met him in the early '90s, in a dim Seattle bar where we were introduced as fellow boxing buffs. In the manner of sports fans everywhere, we immediately fell to swapping code and comparing favorites to define each others' identity.

In my ignorance I'd vaguely heard that he was a respected writer, but it was his boxing talk that convinced me of his substance. He is a scholar,

a moral historian, a shrewdly observant technical analyst, and a skilled handicapper. As I learned over the ensuing years, he brings the same voracious intellect and encyclopedic memory to team sports, movies, modern music and literature, arcane history, exotic sciences, and whatever subject he's researching for the moment.

At the time my limit was boxing. When I asked for something of his to read, he gave me what would interest me — a tattered photocopy of one story, "Beast of the Heartland." I recognized it as sparked by the infamous case of boxer Sugar Ray Seales, who fought on for years after he was legally blind in both eyes. But Shepard's story went far beyond mere scandal. It plunged into the luminously sharp and fearful mind of the blind boxer Shepard called Bobby Mears. It explored the mystery of what he saw in the darkness, and why he fought there. The rich language conveyed piercing physicality and a precise understanding of the strange, hard life of the ring and the parasites who surround it. The history of writing about boxing stretches all the way from Homer's *Iliad* to Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates. In my opinion, "Beast of the Heartland" ranks with the finest.

A few years later Shepard recruited me, among many others, to join his campaign to clean up the regulation of boxing in the state where he was living at the time. He'd discovered that boxers who were suspended for medical problems in other jurisdictions were being shipped in to fight. Ray Seales and Bobby Mears all over again. He refused to tolerate it.

Shepard researched the laws, confronted officials, dragged the news media into blinking awareness, bombarded government agencies with phone calls and letters, and circulated a petition that bounced from coast to coast collecting support and signatures from famous names in journalism, Hollywood, and the fight game. He coaxed, browbeat and inspired his troops to action. He was genuinely furious at the cruel ineptitude that allowed desperate men to be exploited and endangered. He spent months in relentless battle, and he won.

That state is considerably more fastidious now in its safety procedures for boxers.

I'd talked boxing and books and movies for years with Lucius without learning the basics of his history, so in preparing to write this I asked him for a thumbnail sketch. He was swamped with serious deadlines, but he fired back several pithy paragraphs overnight by e-mail.

Lucius Shepard was born in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1947. He was, he explains, "raised up hard in Daytona Beach, Florida, by an old man who beat the shit out of me with considerable relish so as to make me read Thucydides, Shakespeare and such. As a result I hated him and had a pretty fair Classical education by the time I was twelve, thirteen. He was a strange guy, an anglophile brought up in gentry Virginia, about whom I know almost nothing."

He learned to box in a youth program without his father knowing. He ended the beatings by fighting back once, decisively, in his early teens. "I got in fights quite a bit in grammar school, high school, and for quite some time thereafter," he allows.

His erudite father's insistence on classical music and literature, on all things exquisitely tasteful, Shepard suspects, may be why "I rebelled. I was drawn to rock and roll, and to all things crude, vulgar and unlovely."

His mother was a Spanish teacher. The best part of his childhood was frequent travel to Latin America—to Cuba, where his mother had friends, and to Mexico and Guatemala.

He enrolled at the University of South Carolina at Chapel Hill but dropped out repeatedly for long journeys to Europe and North Africa, Afghanistan, and India.

Shepard's life is dense in incident and his experiences often serve as fuel for his fiction.

During that period, for instance, he worked in the black market in the Khan al Khalili bazaar in Cairo for about a year. Readers will recognize the backdrop for his story, "All the Perfumes of Araby."

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Shepard explains, "I was doing stuff for a man who owned several shops in the bazaar that catered to tourists, but whose main business was the money market and smuggling. During the '60s, it was tough to get anything from the West in Egypt. Among the things my friend brought in were good quality women's stockings, hacksaw blades, electronics. He also trafficked in drugs and on occasion I saw uncut diamonds that were moved up through the Sudan. My job initially involved maneuvering wealthy tourists to Affiifi (my boss's name) so he could change their money. He was always engaged in collecting immense sums of Western currency which he then would deliver to countries without a viable currency — Red China and such. My duties never increased to the supremely illegal, but I saw lots of heavy shit and I did a vast quantity of opium."

In 1967, when he returned to the States, he was in bad shape, "pretty much crazy," he says.

"Best thing that could have happened to me was getting busted in NYC for drugs and weapons. I was only in jail about two months waiting for trial, but the experience brought me to my senses."

Released on probation, he returned to Chapel Hill and went back to school. He got married, dropped out, and went traveling again.

He and his wife were heading for California when their car broke down in Detroit and they had to get jobs. They dug in and had a son. Shepard played with various rock bands around the Midwest circuit through most of the '70s.

He had always written, but his formal beginning came in 1980. It was almost accidental that he chose fantasy and science fiction.

"A band I had great hopes for broke up. My wife got tired of me moping about the house watching the PTL Club, so she sent half a story I'd written to this workshop [Clarion] and I was accepted. It was a genre workshop, so I had to write the stuff. But I like working with fantasy elements, especially in short forms — it seems to work as amplifier to whatever thing I'm trying to say."

After the workshop came the divorce. Shepard fled to El Salvador, "As hellish a place," he says, "as I've ever seen."

His stories started selling in the early '80s while he was based in New England and New York City.

The grace and authority of his prose, the driving characters combined with zesty invention demand immediate attention. The stories and novels kept rolling out. The prizes began to heap up.

In the early '90s he moved to Seattle and has been based on the West Coast since then.

"I'd have to say that the last eight years have been a kind of healing process and also a reconfiguring of my brain as far as figuring out stuff about writing — I've been a terrible under-achiever my entire life, but it's my intention to be one hell of a late bloomer."

Shepard uses the genre forms for his own literary purposes and he is always chasing the big fish, the central questions. The nature of good and evil, the search for meaning and significance. "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" is as rigorous an exploration as I've ever read of the question of free will. The novel *Green Eyes* begins by rattling the whole notion of individual identity. Not Cheever nor Roth, Bellow nor Updike have written more tenderly and acutely about the breakup of a marriage than Shepard does in "The End of Life as We Know It."

I don't think anyone has written more devastating fiction about the human processes of war than Lucius Shepard.

Among other praises, critics have compared Shepard to Robert Stone and called him the "rock and roll Joseph Conrad." This is understandable considering shared skills as well as war and dark hearts. And all three writers know what they're talking about. Reality is a powerful launching pad for the imagination.

When Shepard sets a story in a particular locale, I'd bet he's been

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there, or somewhere very like it. The details of color, smell, and feel are too crisp and vivid not to have solid roots.

I get the same hit of absolute credibility from the intense psychology of his characters. In the stunningly masterful "R & R," the protagonist, Mingolla, flails as his carefully constructed system of superstitions is melted by random horrors. Long after I'd read "R & R," Shepard told me that despite his rational understanding, he himself has a spectrum of idiosyncratic superstitions ranging from obsessive throwing of the I Ching, to being compelled to leave any room where a Steven Seagal film is showing on a screen. I should have suspected.

Nobody understands the personal identity of fiction better than Shepard himself. In a piece called "God Is in the Details," he described it this way:

"Writing fiction is like taking a rubbing of your brain. All the bulges and convolutions and fissures will show up in your work whether you want them to or not."

The "rubblings" of Shepard's brain are Rorschach storms. His work is sometimes cruel but it is never cool. In an era when the dispassionate chill of irony is the safe stance, Shepard is fevered, enraptured, infuriated, consumed by passion.

A 1990 Shepard column for *Journal Wired* was titled "Remedial Reading for the Generation of Swine." In it, Shepard began with a scorching attack on petty bickering among the genre's practitioners, and insisted that there was genuine vileness in the world worth every ounce of human will to combat. The example he chose was the recent news report of six men savagely murdered and de-brained in El Salvador. He proceeded to imagine the exact process of those murders in such emotional detail that, by the end, both reader and writer are sick and exhausted and despairing.

"...I'm going to let this stand unedited, this column," Shepard writes, "with its bitter title and initial venom and its schizoid resolution, because I meant the things I said as I wrote them, because I felt intensely about them, because it's all I know how to say at the moment, because I feel so strongly that something has to be said...."

Which, to me, seems a decent description of Lucius Shepard. He writes what he is. He is what he writes. He means it. ♣

Lucius Shepard has been one of our most treasured contributors for the past two decades. This extraordinary short novel will undoubtedly let you see why—it's vintage Shepard, a tale of salvation and sinning, situated in contemporary Russia in a club known simply as "Eternity."

Eternity and Afterward

By Lucius Shepard

PUNCTUALITY HAD COME
to be something of a curse for Viktor
Chemayev. Though toward most of
his affairs he displayed the typical non-

chalance of a young man with a taste for the good life and the money to indulge it, he maintained an entirely different attitude toward his business appointments. Often he would begin to prepare himself hours in advance, inspecting his mirror image for flaws, running a hand over his shaved scalp, trying on a variety of smiles, none of which fit well on his narrow Baltic face, and critiquing the hang of his suit (his tailor had not yet mastered the secret of cutting cloth for someone with broad shoulders and a thin chest). Once satisfied with his appearance he would pace the length and breadth of his apartment, worrying over details, tactical nuances, planning every word, every expression, every gesture. Finally, having no better use for the time remaining, he would drive to the meeting place and there continue to pace and worry and plan. On occasion this compulsiveness caused him problems. He would drink too much while waiting in a bar, or catch cold from standing in the open air, or simply grow

bored and lose his mental sharpness. But no matter how hard he tried to change his ways he remained a slave to the practice. And so it was that one night toward the end of October he found himself sitting in the parking lot of Eternity, watching solitary snowflakes spin down from a starless sky, fretting over his appointment with Yuri Lebedev, the owner of the club and its chief architect, from whom he intended to purchase the freedom of the woman he loved.

For once it seemed that Chemayev's anxiety was not misplaced. The prospect of meeting Lebedev, less a man than a creature of legend whom few claimed to have ever seen, was daunting of itself, and though Chemayev was a frequent visitor to Eternity and thus acquainted with many of its eccentricities, it occurred to him now that Lebedev and his establishment were one and the same, an inscrutable value shining forth from the dingy chaos of Moscow, a radiant character whose meaning no one had been able to determine and whose menace, albeit palpable, was impossible to define. The appointment had been characterized as a mere formality, but Chemayev suspected that Lebedev's notion of formality was quite different from his own, and while he waited he went over in his mind the several communications he had received from Eternity's agents, wondering if he might have overlooked some devious turn of phrase designed to mislead him.

The club was located half an hour to the north and west of the city center amidst a block of *krushovas*, crumbling apartment projects that sprouted from the frozen, rubble-strewn waste like huge gray headstones memorializing the Krushchev era — the graveyard of the Soviet state, home to generations of cabbage-eating drunks and party drones. Buildings so cheaply constructed that if you pressed your hand to their cement walls, your palm would come away coated with sand. No sign, neon or otherwise, announced the club's presence. None was needed. Eternity's patrons were members of the various *mafiyas* and they required no lure apart from that of its fabulous reputation and exclusivity. All that was visible of the place was a low windowless structure resembling a bunker — the rest of the complex lay deep underground; but the lot that surrounded it was packed with Mercedes and Ferraris and Rolls Royces. As Chemayev gazed blankly, unseeing, through the windshield of his ten-year-old Lada, shabby as a mule among thoroughbreds, his attention was caught by a

group of men and women hurrying toward the entrance. The men walked with a brisk gait, talking and laughing, and the women followed silently in their wake, their furs and jewelry in sharp contrast to the men's conservative attire, holding their collars shut against the wind or putting a hand to their head to keep an extravagant coiffure in place, tottering in their high heels, their breath venting in little white puffs.

"Viktor!" Someone tapped on the driver side window. Chemayev cleared away condensation from the glass and saw the flushed, bloated features of his boss, Lev Polutin, peering in at him. Several feet away stood a pale man in a leather trenchcoat, with dark hair falling to his shoulders and a seamed, sorrowful face. "What are you doing out in the cold?" Polutin asked as Chemayev rolled down the window. "Come inside and drink with us!" His 100-proof breath produced a moist warmth on Chemayev's cheeks.

"I'll be along soon," Chemayev said, annoyed by this interruption to his routine.

Polutin straightened and blew on his hands. A big-bellied ursine man of early middle age, his muscles already running to fat, hair combed back in a wave of grease and black gleam from his brow. All his features were crammed toward the center of his round face, and his gestures had the tailored expansiveness common to politicians and actors out in public, to all those who delight in being watched. He introduced his companion as Niall March, a business associate from Ireland. March gave Chemayev an absent nod. "Let's get on in," he said to Polutin. "I'm fucking freezing." But Polutin did not appear to have heard. He beamed at Chemayev, as might a father approving of his child's cleverness, and said, "I promised Niall I'd show him the new Russia. And here you are, Viktor. Here you are." He glanced toward March. "This one..." — he pointed at Chemayev — "always thinking, always making a plan." He affected a comical expression of concern. "If I weren't such a carefree fellow, I'd suspect him of plotting against me."

Asshole, Chemayev thought as he watched the two men cross the lot. Polutin liked to give himself intellectual airs, to think of himself as criminal royalty, and to his credit he had learned how to take advantage of society's convulsions; but that required no particular intelligence, only the instincts and principles of a vulture. As for the new Russia, what a load

of shit! Chemayev turned his eyes to the nearest of the *krushovas* no more than fifteen yards away, the building's crumbling face picked out by wan flickering lights, evidence that power was out on some of the floors and candles were in use. The fluorescent brightness of the entranceway was sentried by a prostitute with bleached hair and a vinyl jacket who paced back and forth with metronomic regularity, pausing at the end of each pass to peer out across the wasteland, as though expecting her relief. There, he thought, that was where the new Russia had been spawned. Open graves infested by the old, the desperate, the addicted, perverts of every stamp. They made the stars behind them look false, they reduced everything they shadowed. If the new Russia existed, it was merely as a byproduct of a past so grim that any possible future would be condemned to embody it.

The prospect of spending an evening with his boss, especially this one, when so much was at stake, weighed on Chemayev. He was not in the mood for Polutin's condescension, his unctuous solicitude. But he could think of no way to avoid it. He stepped from the car and took a deep breath of the biting, gasoline-flavored Moscow air. A few hours more, and his troubles would be over. All the wormy, enfeebling pressures of the past year would be evicted from his spirit, and for the first time he'd be able to choose a path in life rather than accept the one upon which he had been set by necessity. Strengthened by this notion, he started across the lot. Each of his footsteps made a crisp sound, as if he were crushing a brittle insect underfoot, and left an impression of his sole in a paper-thin crust of ice.

Chemayev checked his pistols at the entrance to Eternity, handing them over to one of Lebedev's young unsmiling soldiers, and descended in an elevator toward the theater that lay at the center of the complex. The empty holsters felt like dead, stubby wings strapped to his sides, increasing his sense of powerlessness — by contrast, the money belt about his waist felt inordinately heavy, as if full of golden bars, not gold certificates. The room into which the elevator discharged him was vast, roughly egg-shaped, larger at the base than at the apex, with snow white carpeting and walls of midnight blue. At the bottom of the egg was a circular stage, currently empty; tiers of white leather booths were arranged around it, occupied by prosperous-looking men and beautiful

women whose conversations blended into a soft rustling that floated upon a bed of gentle, undulant music. Each booth encompassed a linen-covered table, and each table was centered by a block of ice hollowed so as to accommodate bottles of chilled vodka. The top of the egg, some thirty feet above the uppermost tier, was obscured by pale swirling mist, and through the mist you could see hanging lights — silvery, delicate, exotically configured shapes that put Chemayev in mind of photographs he'd seen of microscopic creatures found in polar seas. To many the room embodied a classic Russian elegance, but Chemayev, whose mother — long deceased — had been an architect and had provided him with an education in the arts, thought the place vulgar, a childish fantasy conceived by someone whose idea of elegance had been derived from old Hollywood movies.

Polutin's booth, as befitted his station, was near the stage. The big man was leaning close to March, speaking energetically into his ear. Chemayev joined them and accepted a glass of vodka. "I was about to tell Niall about the auction," Polutin said to him, then returned his attention to March. "You see, each night at a certain time...a different hour every night, depending on our host's whim. Each night a beautiful woman will rise from beneath the stage. Naked as the day she came into the world. She carries a silver tray upon which there lies a single red rose. She will walk among the tables, and offer the rose to everyone in attendance."

"Yeah?" March cocked an eye toward Polutin. "Then what?"

"Then the bidding begins."

"What are they bidding for?" March's responses were marked by a peculiar absence of inflection, and he appeared disinterested in Polutin's lecture; yet Chemayev had the sense that he was observing everything with unnatural attentiveness. His cheeks were scored by two vertical lines as deep as knife cuts that extended from beneath the corners of his eyes to the corners of his lips. His mouth was thin, wide, almost chimpanzee-like in its mobility and expressiveness — this at odds with his eyes, which were small and pale and inactive. It was as if at the moment of creation he had been immersed in a finishing bath, one intended to add an invigorating luster, that had only partially covered his face, leaving the eyes and all that lay behind them lacking some vital essential.

"Why...for the rose, of course." Polutin seemed put off by March's

lack of enthusiasm. "Sometimes the bidding is slow, but I've seen huge sums paid over. I believe the record is a hundred thousand pounds."

"A hundred grand for a fucking flower?" March said. "Sounds like bollocks to me."

"It's an act of conspicuous consumption," Chemayev said; he tossed back his vodka, poured another from a bottle of Ketel One. "Those who bid are trying to demonstrate how little money means to them."

"There's an element of truth in what Viktor says," Polutin said archly, "but his understanding is incomplete. You are not only bidding for status...for a *fucking flower*." He spooned caviar onto a silver dish and spread some on a cracker. "Think of a rose. Redder than fire. Redder than a beast's eye. You're bidding for that color, that priceless symptom of illusion." He popped the cracker into his mouth and chewed noisily; once he had swallowed he said to March, "You see, Viktor does not bid. He's a frugal man, and a frugal man cannot possibly understand the poetry of the auction." He worried at a piece of cracker stuck in his teeth. "Viktor never gambles. He picks up a check only when it might prove an embarrassment to do otherwise. His apartment is a proletarian tragedy, and you've seen that piece of crap he drives. He's not wealthy, but he is far from poor. He should want for nothing. Yet he hordes money like an old woman." Polutin smiled at Chemayev with exaggerated fondness. "All his friends wonder why this is."

Chemayev ignored this attempt to rankle him and poured another vodka. He noted with pleasure that the pouches beneath Polutin's eyes were more swollen than usual, looking as if they were about to give birth to fat worms. A few more years of heavy alcohol intake, and he'd be ripe for a cardiac event. He lifted his glass to Polutin and returned his smile.

"To be successful in business one must have a firm grasp of human nature," said Polutin, preparing another cracker. "So naturally I have studied my friends and associates. From my observations of Viktor I've concluded that he is capable of magic." He glanced back and forth between Chemayev and March, as if expecting a strong reaction.

March gave an amused snort. "I suppose that means he's got himself a little wand."

Polutin laughed and clapped March on the shoulder. "Let me explain," he said. "During the early days of *glasnost*, Yuri Lebedev was the

strongest man in all the *mafiyas*. He made a vast fortune, but he also made enemies. The dogs were nipping at his heels, and he recognized it was only a matter of time before they brought him down. It was at this point he began to build Eternity."

He gobbled the second cracker, washed it down with vodka; after swallowing with some difficulty he went on: "The place is immense. All around us the earth is honeycombed with chambers. Apartments, a casino, a gymnasium, gardens. Even a surgery. Eternity is both labyrinth and fortress, a country with its own regulations and doctrines. There are no policemen here, not even corrupt ones. But commit a crime within these walls, a crime that injures Yuri, and you will be dealt with according to his laws. Yuri is absolutely secure. He need never leave until the day he dies. Yet that alone does not convey the full extent of his genius. In the surgery he had doctors create a number of doubles for him. The doctors, of course, were never heard from again, and it became impossible to track Yuri. In fact it's not at all certain that he is still here. Some will tell you he is dead. Others say he lives in Chile, in Tahiti. In a *dacha* on the Black Sea. He's been reported in Turkestan, Montreal, Chiang Mai. He is seen everywhere. But no one knows where he is. No one will ever know."

"That's quite clever, that is," March said.

Polutin spread his hands as if to reveal a marvel. "Right in front of our eyes Yuri built a device that would cause him to disappear, and then he stepped inside it. Like a pharaoh vanishing inside his tomb. We were so fascinated in watching the trick develop, we never suspected it was a real trick." He licked a fleck of caviar from his forefinger. "Had Yuri vanished in any way other than the one he chose, his enemies would have kept searching for him, no matter how slim their chances of success. But he created Eternity both as the vehicle of his magical act and as a legacy, a gift to enemies and friends alike. He surrendered his power with such panache.... It was a gesture no one could resist. People forgave him. Now he is revered. I've heard him described as 'the sanest man in Moscow.' Which in these times may well serve a definition of God."

Apprehension spidered Chemayev's neck. Whatever parallel Polutin was trying to draw between himself and Yuri, it would probably prove to be a parable designed to manipulate him. The whole thing was tiresome, predictable.... Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a tall girl with dark

brown hair. He started to call to her, mistaking her for Larissa, but then realized she didn't have Larissa's long legs, her quiet bearing.

"There is tremendous irony in the situation," Polutin continued. "Whether dead or alive, in the act of vanishing Yuri regained his power. Those close to him — or to his surrogates — are like monks. They keep watch day and night. Everything said and done here is monitored. And he is protected not only by paranoia. Being invisible, his actions concealed, he's too valuable to kill. He's become the confidante of politicians. Generals avail themselves of his services. As do various *mafiya* bosses." He inclined his head, as if suggesting that he might be among this privileged number. "There are those who maintain that Yuri's influence with these great men is due to the fact that his magical powers are not limited to primitive sleights-of-hand such as the illusion that enabled his disappearance. They claim he has become an adept of secret disciplines, that he works miracles on behalf of the rich and the mighty." Polutin's attitude grew conspiratorial. "A friend of mine involved in building the club told me that he came into the theater once — this very room — and found it filled with computer terminals. Scrolling across the screens were strings of what he assumed were letters in an unknown alphabet. He later discovered they were Kabalistic symbols. Some weeks later he entered the theater again. There was no sign of the terminals...or of anything else, for that matter. The room was choked with silvery fog. My friend decided to keep clear of the place thereafter. But not long before Eternity opened its doors, curiosity got the best of him and he visited the theater a third time. On this occasion he found the room completely dark and heard hushed voices chanting the same unintelligible phrase over and over." Polutin allowed himself a dramatic pause. "None of this seems to reflect the usual methods of construction."

"What's this got to do with your boy Viktor?" March asked. "He's planning a night club, too, is he?"

"Not that I know of." Polutin's eyes went lazily to Chemayev, like a man reassuring himself that his prize possession was still in its rightful place. "However, I see in Viktor many of the qualities Yuri possessed. He's bright, ambitious. He can be ruthless when necessary. He understands the uses of compassion, but if he wasn't capable of violence and betrayal, he would never have risen to his present position."

"I only did as I was told," Chemayev said fiercely. "You gave me no choice." Furious, he prepared to defend himself further, but Polutin did not acknowledge him, turning instead to March.

"It's in his talent for self-deception that Viktor most resembles Yuri," he said. "In effect, he has made parts of himself disappear. But while Yuri became an adept, a true professional, Viktor is still a rank amateur...though perhaps I underestimate him. He may have some more spectacular disappearance in mind."

Chemayev's feeling of apprehension spiked, but he refused to give Polutin the satisfaction of thinking that his words had had any effect; he scanned the upper tiers of booths, pretending to search for a familiar face.

"If I were to ask Viktor to describe himself," Polutin went on, "he would repeat much of what I've told you. But he would never describe himself as cautious. Yet I swear to you, Viktor is the most cautious man of my acquaintance. He won't admit it, not to you or me. Nor to himself. But let me give you an example of how his mind works. Viktor has a lover. Larissa is her name. She works here at Eternity. As a prostitute."

"Don't tell him my business!" Chemayev could feel the pulse in his neck.

Polutin regarded him calmly. "This is common knowledge, is it not?"

"It's scarcely common knowledge in Ireland."

"Yes," said Polutin. "But then we are not in Ireland. We are in Moscow. Where, if memory serves me, underlings do not dare treat their superiors with such impertinence."

Chemayev did not trust himself to speak.

"Larissa is a beautiful woman. Such a lovely face" — Polutin bunched the fingers of his left hand and kissed their tips, the gesture of an ecstatic connoisseur — "your heart breaks to see it! Like many who work here, she does so in order to pay off a debt incurred by someone in her family. She's not a typical whore. She's intelligent, refined. And very expensive."

"How much are we talking about?" March asked. "I've a few extra pounds in me pocket."

Chemayev shot him a wicked glance, and March winked at him. "Just having you on, mate. Women aren't my thing."

"What exactly is your thing?" Chemayev asked. "Some sort of sea creature? Perhaps you prefer the invertebrates?"

"Nah." March went deadpan. "It's got nothing to do with sex."

"The point is this," Polutin said. "Viktor's choice of a lover speaks to his cautious nature. A young man of his status, ambitious and talented, but as yet not entirely on a firm footing...such a man is vulnerable in many ways. If he were to take a wife it would add to his vulnerability. The woman might be threatened or kidnapped. In our business you must be secure indeed if you intend to engage in anything resembling a normal relationship. So Viktor has chosen a prostitute under the protection of Yuri Lebedev. No one will try to harm her for fear of reprisals. Eternity protects its own."

Chemayev started up from the booth, but Polutin beckoned him to stay. "A minute longer, Viktor. Please."

"Why are you doing this?" Chemayev asked. "Is there a purpose, or is it merely an exercise?"

"I'm trying to instruct you," said Polutin. "I'm trying to show you who you are. I think you have forgotten some important truths."

Chemayev drew a steadying breath, let it out with a dry, papery sound. "I know very well who I am, but I'm confused about much else."

"It won't hurt you to listen." Polutin ran a finger along the inside of his collar to loosen it and addressed March. "Why does Viktor hide his cautious nature from himself? Perhaps he doesn't like what he sees in the mirror. I've known men who've cultivated a sensitive self-image in order to obscure the brutish aspects of their character. Perhaps the explanation is as simple as that. But I think there's more to it. I suspect it may be for him a form of practice. As I've said, Viktor and Yuri have much in common...most pertinently, a talent for self-deception. I believe it was the calculated development of this ability that led Yuri to understand the concept of deception in its entirety. Its subtleties, its potentials." Polutin shifted his bulk, his belly bumping against the edge of the table, causing vodka to slosh in all the glasses. "At any rate, I think I understand how Viktor manages to hide from himself. He has permitted himself to fall in love with his prostitute — or to think he has fallen in love. This affords him the illusion of incaution. How incautious it must seem to the casual eye for a man to fall in love with a woman he cannot possibly have. Who lives in another man's house. Whom he can see only for an hour or two in the mornings, and the odd vacation. Who is bound by contract to spend the

years of her great beauty fucking strangers. Is this a tactical maneuver? A phase of Viktor's development. A necessary step along the path toward some larger, more magical duplicity. Or could it be a simple mistake? A mistake he is now tempted to compound, thus making himself more vulnerable than ever." He spread his hands, expressing a stagy degree of helplessness. "But these are questions only Viktor can answer."

"I bet I'm going to like working for you," March said. "You're a right interesting fellow."

"Nobody likes working for me. If you doubt this, ask Viktor." Polutin locked his hands behind his head, thrusting out his belly so that it overlapped the edge of the table; he looked with unwavering disapproval at Chemayev. "Now you may go. When you've regained your self-control, come back and drink some more. I'm told the entertainment this evening will be wonderful."

THE COUNTERTOP of the bar in the lounge adjoining the theater was overlaid with a mosaic depicting a party attended by guests from every decade of the Twentieth Century, all with cunningly rendered faces done in caricature, most unknown to Chemayev, but a few clearly recognizable. There was Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria, the bloody-handed director of the KVD under Stalin, his doughy, peasant features lent a genteel air by rimless pince-nez. He was standing with a man wearing a Party armband and a woman in a green dress — Beria was glancing up as if he sensed someone overhead was watching him. Elsewhere, a uniformed Josef Stalin held conversation with his old pal Krushchev. Lenin and Gorbachev and Dobrynin stood at the center of small groups. Even old Yeltsin was there, mopping his sweaty brow with a handkerchief. Looking at it, Chemayev, sick with worry, felt he was being viewed with suspicion not only by his boss, but by these historical personages as well. It wasn't possible, he thought, that Polutin could know what he was planning; yet everything he'd said indicated that he did know something. Why else all his talk of disappearances, of Larissa and vulnerability? And who was the Irishman with him? A paid assassin. That much was for sure. No other occupation produced that kind of soulless lizard. Chemayev's heart labored, as if it were pumping something heavier than blood. All his plans,

so painstakingly crafted, were falling apart at the moment of success. He touched his money belt, the airline tickets in his suit pocket, half-expecting them to be missing. Finding them in place acted to soothe him. It's all right, he told himself. Whatever Polutin knew, and perhaps it was nothing, perhaps all his bullshit had been designed to impress his new pet snake...whatever he thought he knew, things had progressed too far for him to pose a real threat.

He ordered a vodka from the bartender, a slender man with dyed white hair and a pleasant country face, wearing a white sweater and slacks. The room was almost empty of customers, just two couples chattering at a distant table. It was decorated in the style of an upscale watering hole — deep comfortable chairs, padded stools, paneled walls — but the ambiance was more exotic than one might expect. White leather upholstery, thick white carpeting. The paneling was fashioned of what appeared to be ivory planks, though they were patterned with a decidedly univory-like grain reminiscent of the markings on moths' wings; the bar itself was constructed of a similar material, albeit of a creamier hue, like wood petrified to marble. The edging of the glass tabletops and the frame of the mirror against which the bottled spirits were arrayed — indeed, every filigree and decorative conceit — were of silver, and there were glints of silver, too, visible among the crystal mysteries of the chandeliers. In great limestone fireplaces at opposite ends of the room burned pearly logs that yielded chemical blue flames, and the light from the chandeliers was also blue, casting glimmers and reflections from every surface, drenching the whiteness of the place in an arctic glamour.

Mounted above the bar was a television set, its volume turned so low that the voices proceeding from it were scarcely more than murmurs; on the screen Aleksander Solzhenitsyn was holding forth on his weekly talk show, preaching the need for moral reform to a worshipful guest. Amused to find the image of the Nobel Laureate in a place whose moral foundation he would vehemently decry, Chemayev moved closer to the set and ordered another vodka. The old bastard had written great novels, he thought. But his sermons needed an editor. Some liked them, of course. The relics who lived in the *krushovas* sucked up his spiritual blah blah blah. Hearing this crap flow from such a wise mouth ennobled their stubborn endurance in the face of food shortages, violent crime, and

unemployment. It validated their mulelike tolerance, it gave lyric tongue to their drunken, docile complaining. Solzhenitsyn was their papa, their pope, the guru of their hopelessness. He knew their suffering, he praised their dazed stolidity as a virtue, he restored their threadbare souls. His words comforted them because they were imbued with the same numbing authority, the same dull stench of official truth, as the windbag belches of the old party lions with dead eyes and poisoned livers whom they had been conditioned to obey. You had to respect Solzhenitsyn. He had once been a Voice. Now he was merely an echo. And a distorted one at that. His years in exile might not have cut him off from the essence of the Russian spirit, but they had decayed his understanding of Russian stupidity. People listened, sure. But they heard just enough to make them reach for a bottle and toast him. The brand of snake oil he was trying to sell was suited only for cutting cheap vodka.

"Old Man Russia." Chemayev waved disparagingly at the screen as the bartender served him, setting the glass down to cover Beria's upturned face. The bartender laughed and said, "Maybe...but he's sure as shit not Old Man Moscow." He reached for a remote and flipped through the channels, settling on a music video. A black man with a sullen, arrogant face was singing to tinny music, creating voluptuous shapes in the air with his hands — Chemayev had the idea that he was preparing to make love to a female version of himself. "MTV," said the bartender with satisfaction and sidled off along the counter.

Chemayev checked his watch. Still nearly three-quarters of an hour to go. He fingered his glass, thinking he'd already had too much. But he felt fine. Anger had burned off the alcohol he'd consumed at Polutin's table. He drank the vodka in a single gulp. Then, in the mirror, he saw Larissa approaching.

As often happened the sight of her shut him down for an instant. She seemed like an exotic form of weather, a column of energy gliding across the room, drawing the light to her. Wearing a blue silk dress that revealed her legs to the mid-thigh. Her dark hair was pinned high and in spite of heavy makeup and eyebrows plucked into severe arches, the naturalness of her beauty shone through. Her face was broad at the cheekbones, tapering to the chin, its shape resembling that of an inverted spearhead, and her generous features — the hazel eyes a bit large for proportion —

could one moment look soft, maternal, the next girlish and seductive. In repose, her lips touched by a smile, eyes half-lidded, she reminded him of the painted figurehead on his Uncle Arkady's boat, which had carried cargo along the Dvina when he was a child. Unlike most figureheads this one had not been carved with eyes wide-open so as to appear intent upon the course ahead, but displayed a look of dreamy, sleek contentment. When he asked why it was different from the rest his uncle told him he hadn't wanted a lookout on his prow, but a woman whose gaze would bless the waters. Chemayev learned that the man who carved the figurehead had been a drunk embittered by lost love, and as a consequence — or so Chemayev assumed — he had created an image that embodied the kind of mystical serenity with which men who are forced to endure much for love tend to imbue their women, a quality that serves to mythologize their actions and make them immune to masculine judgments.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as she came into his arms.

"They told me I don't have to work tonight. You know...because you're paying." She sat on the adjoining stool, her expression troubled; he asked what was wrong. "Nothing," she said. "It's just I can't quite believe it. It's all so difficult to believe, you know." She leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth — lightly so as not to smear her lipstick.

"Don't worry," he said. "Everything's taken care of."

"I know. I'm just nervous." Her smile flickered on and off. "I wonder what it'll be like...America."

He cupped the swell of her cheek, and she leaned into his hand. "It'll be strange," he said. "But we'll be in the mountains to begin with. Just the two of us. We'll be able to make sense of it all before we decide where we want to end up."

"How will we do that?"

"We'll learn all about the place from magazines...newspapers. TV."

She laughed. "I can't picture us doing much reading if we're alone in a cabin."

"We'll leave the TV on. Pick things up subliminally." He grinned, nudged his glass with a finger. "Want a drink?"

"No, I have to go back in a minute. I haven't finished packing. And there's something I have to sign."

That worried him. "What is it?"

"A release. It says I haven't contracted any diseases or been physically abused." She laughed again, a single note clear and bright as a piano tone. "As if anyone would sue Eternity." She took his face in her hands and studied him. Then she kissed his brow. "I love you so much," she said, her lips still pressed to his skin. He was too dizzy to speak.

She settled back, holding his right hand in her lap. "Do you know what I want most. I want to talk. I want to talk with you for hours and hours."

Chemayev loved to hear her talk — she wove events and objects and ideas together into textures of such palpable solidity that he could lie back against them, grasped by their resilient contours, and needed only to say "Yes" and "Really" and "Uh huh" every so often, providing a minor structural component that enabled her to extend and deepen her impromptu creations. The prospect that he might have to contribute more than this was daunting. "What will we talk about?" he asked.

"About you, for one thing. I hardly know anything about your family, your childhood."

"We talk," he said. "Just this morning...."

"Yes, sure. But only when you're driving me to school, and you're so busy dodging traffic you can't say much. And when we're at your apartment there's never time. Not that I'm complaining." She gave his hand a squeeze. "We'll make love for hours, then we'll talk. I want you to reveal all your secrets before I start to bore you."

He saw her then as she looked each morning in the car, face scrubbed clean of makeup, the sweetly sad pragmatist of their five hundred days on her way to the university, almost ordinary in her jeans and cloth jacket, ready to spend hours listening to tired astronomers, hungover geographers, talentless poets, trying to find in their listless words some residue of truth, some glint of promise, a fact still empowered by its original energy, something that would bring her a glimpse of possibility beyond that which she knew. For the first time he wondered how America and freedom would change her. Not much, he decided. Not in any essential way. She would open like a flower to the sun, she would bloom, but she would not change. The naiveté of this notion did not bother him. He believed in her. Sometimes it seemed he believed in her even more than he loved her.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, and smiled slyly as if she knew the answer.

"Evil things," he told her.

"Is that so?" She drew him close and slid his hand beneath her skirt. Then she edged forward on the stool, encouraging him. He touched her sex with a fingertip and she let out a gasp. Her head drooped, rested on his shoulder. He thrust aside the material of her panties. All her warmth was open to him. But then she pushed his hand away and whispered, "No, no! I can't!" She remained leaning against him, her body tense and trembling. "I'm not ashamed, you understand," she said, the words muffled by his shoulder. "I can't bear the idea of doing anything *here*." She let out a soft, cluttered sound — another laugh, he thought. "But there's no shame in me. I'll prove it to you tonight. On the plane."

He stroked her hair. "You'll be asleep ten minutes after take-off. You always sleep when we travel. Like a little baby."

"Not tonight." She broke from the embrace. Her face was grave, as if she were stating a vow. "I'm not going to sleep at all. Not until I absolutely have to."

"If you say so. But I bet I'm right." He checked his watch again.

"How long?" she asked.

"Less than half an hour. But I don't know how long I'll be with...with whoever it is I'm meeting."

"One of the doubles. There must be a dozen of them. I can't be sure, but I think I can tell most of them apart. They vary slightly in height. In weight. A couple have moles."

"What do you call them?"

"Yuri." She shrugged. "What else? Some of the girls invent funny names for them. But I guess I don't find them funny."

He looked down at the counter. "You know, we've never spoken about what it's like for you here. I know some of it, of course. But your life, the way you spend your days..."

"I didn't think you wanted to talk about it."

"I guess I didn't. It just seems strange...but it's not important."

"We can talk about it if you want." She wrapped a loose curl around her forefinger. "It isn't so bad, really. When I'm not at school I like to sit in the theater mornings and read. There's nobody about, and it's quiet."

Peaceful. Like an empty church. Every two weeks the doctor comes to examine us. She's very nice. She brings us chocolates. Otherwise, we're left pretty much to our own devices. Most of the girls are so young, it's almost possible to believe I'm at boarding school. But then...." Her mouth twisted into an unhappy shape. "There's not much else to tell."

Something gave way in Chemayev. The pressures of the preceding months, the subterfuge, the planning, and now this pitiful recitation with its obvious omissions — his inner defenses collapsed under the weight of these separate travails, conjoined in a flood of stale emotion. Old suffocated panics, soured desires, yellowed griefs, lumps of mummified terror...the terror he had felt sitting alone at night, certain that he would lose her, his head close to bursting with despair. His eyes teared. He linked his hands behind her neck and drew her to him so that their foreheads touched. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry it took so long."

"It wasn't long! It's so much money! And you got it all in less than a year!"

"Every day I see enough money to choke the world. I could have fixed the books, I could have done something."

"Yes...and then what? Polutin would have had you killed. God, Viktor! You amazed me! Don't you understand? You were completely unexpected. I never thought anyone would care enough about me to do what you've done." She kissed his eyes, applied delicate kisses all over his face. "When you told me what you were up to, I felt like a princess imprisoned in a high tower. And you were the prince trying to save me. You know me. I'm not one to believe in fairy tales. But I liked this one — it was a nice fantasy, and I needed a fantasy. I was certain you were lying to me...or to yourself. I prepared for the inevitable. But you turned out to be a real prince." She rubbed his stubbly head. "A prince with a terrible haircut."

He tried to smile, but emotion was still strong in him and his facial muscles wouldn't work properly.

"Don't punish yourself. Can't you see how happy I am? It's almost over now. Please, Viktor! I want you to be happy, too."

He gathered himself, swallowed back the tight feeling in his throat. "I'm all right," he said. "I'm sorry. I just...I can't...."

"I know," she said. "It's been hard for both of us. I know." She lifted

his wrist so she could see his watch. "I have to go. I don't want to, but I have to. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'll be fine," he said. "Go ahead...go."

"Should I wait for you here?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, wait here, and we'll ride up together. As soon as I'm through with Yuri I'll call my security people. They'll meet us at the entrance."

She kissed him again, her tongue flirting with his, a lush contact that left him muddled. "I'll see you soon," she said, trailing her hand across his cheek; then she walked off toward a recessed door next to the fireplace at the far end of the room — the same door that led to Yuri Lebedev's office and, ultimately, to the inscrutable heart of Eternity.

Without Larissa beside him Chemayev felt adrift, cut off from energy and purpose. His thoughts seemed to be circling, slowly eddying, as the surface of a stream might eddy after the sudden twisting submergence of a silvery fish. They seemed less thoughts than shadows of the moment just ended. On the television screen above the bar a child was sitting in a swing hung from the limb of an oak tree, spied on by an evil androgynous creature with a painted white face and wearing a lime green body stocking, who lurked in the shadows at the edge of a forest. All this underscored by an anxious, throbbing music. Chemayev watched the video without critical or aesthetic bias, satisfied by color and movement alone, and he was given a start when the bartender came over and offered him a drink in a glass with the silver initial L on its side.

"What's this?" Chemayev asked, and the bartender said, "Yuri's private booze. Everybody gets one. Everybody who meets with him." He set down the glass, and Chemayev viewed it with suspicion. The liquid appeared to be vodka.

"You don't have to drink," the bartender said. "But it's Yuri's custom."

Chemayev wondered if he was being tested. The courageous thing to do, the courteous thing, would be to drink. But abstinence might prove the wiser course.

"I can pour you another if you'd like. I can open a new bottle." The bartender produced an unopened bottle; it, too, was embossed with a silver L.

"Why don't you do that?" Chemayev told him. "I could use a drink, but...uh...."

"As you like." The bartender stripped the seal from the bottle and poured. He did not appear in the least disturbed and Chemayev supposed that he had been through this process before.

The vodka was excellent and Chemayev was relieved when, after several minutes, he remained conscious and his stomach gave no sign that he had ingested poison.

"Another?" the bartender asked.

"Sure." Chemayev pushed the glass forward.

"Two's the limit, I'm afraid. It's precious stuff." The bartender lifted the glass that Chemayev had refused, offered a silent toast and drank. "Fuck, that's good!" He dabbed at his mouth with a cocktail napkin. "Almost everyone who tries it comes back and offers to buy a couple of bottles. But it's not for sale. You have to meet with Yuri to earn your two shots."

"Or work as a bartender in Eternity, eh?" Chemayev suggested.

"Privileges of the job. I'm always delighted to serve a suspicious soul."

"I imagine you get quite a few."

"People have every right to be suspicious. This is a weird place. Don't get me wrong — it's great working here. But it takes getting used to."

"I can imagine."

"Oh, I wouldn't bet on it. You have no idea what goes on here after hours. But once you've met Yuri" — the bartender slung a towel over his shoulder — "you'll probably be able to educate me. Everyone says it's quite an experience."

Chemayev downed the second vodka. Yet another video was showing on the TV, and something was interfering with the transmission. First there was an intense flickering, then a succession of scenes skittered across the screen, as if the video were playing on an old-fashioned projector and the film was breaking free of the spool. He glanced at the bartender. The man was standing at the opposite end of the counter with his head thrown back, apparently howling with laughter; yet though his mouth was open and the ligature of his neck cabled, he wasn't making a sound. His white hair glowed like phosphorus. Unnerved, Chemayev

turned again to the TV. On screen, to the accompaniment of a gloomy folk song, two women in white jumpsuits were embracing on a couch, deep in a passionate kiss. As he watched, the taller of the two, a blond with sharp cheekbones, unzipped her lover's jumpsuit to the waist, exposing the slopes of her breasts.... It was at this point that Chemayev experienced a confusing dislocation. Frames began flipping past too rapidly to discern, the strobing light causing him to grow drowsy yet dumbly attentive; then a veneer of opaque darkness slid in front of the screen, oval in shape, like a yawning mouth. There was a moment when he had a claustrophobic sense of being enclosed, and the next instant he found himself standing in the blackness beyond the mouth. He had the impression that this black place had reached out and enveloped him, and for that reason, though he remained drowsy and distanced from events, he felt a considerable measure of foreboding.

From Chemayev's vantage it was impossible to estimate the size of the room in which he stood — the walls and ceiling were lost in darkness — but he could tell it was immense. Illumination was provided by long glowing silvery bars that looked to be hovering at an uncertain distance overhead, their radiance too feeble to provide any real perspective. Small trees and bushes with black trunks and branches grew in disorderly ranks on every side; their leaves were papery, white, bespotted with curious, sharply drawn, black designs — like little leaf-shaped magical texts. This must be, he thought, the garden Polutin had mentioned, though it seemed more thicket than garden. The leaves crisped against his jacket as he pushed past; twigs clawed at his trouser legs. After a couple of minutes he stumbled into a tiny clearing choked with pale weeds. Beetles scuttered in amongst them. Fat little scarabs, their chitin black and gleamless, they were horrid in their simplicity, like official notifications of death. The air was cool, thick with the skunky scent of the vegetation. He heard no sound other than those he himself made. Yet he did not believe he was alone. He went cautiously, stopping every so often to peer between branches and to listen.

After several minutes more he came to a ruinous path of gray cobblestones, many uprooted from their bed of white clay, milky blades of grass thrusting up among them. The path was little more than a foot wide, overhung by low branches that forced him to duck; it wound away

among trees taller than those he had first encountered. He followed it and after less than a minute he reached what he assumed to be the center of the garden. Ringed by trees so tall they towered nearly to the bars of light was a circular plaza some forty feet in width, constructed of the same gray stones, here laid out in a concentric pattern. In its midst stood the remains of a fountain, its unguessable original form reduced to a head-high mound of rubble, a thin stream of silvery water arcing from a section of shattered lead pipe, splashing, sluicing away into the carved fragments tumbled at its base. Sitting cross-legged beside it, his back to Chemayev, was a shirtless man with dark shoulder-length hair, his pale skin figured by intricate black tattoos, their designs reminiscent of those on the leaves.

"March?" Chemayev took a step toward the man. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" March said in a contemplative tone. "Why, I'm feeling right at home. That's what I'm doing. How about yourself?"

"I have a meeting," Chemayev said. "With Yuri Lebedev."

March maintained his yogi-like pose. "Oh, yeah? He was banging about a minute ago. Try giving him a shout. He might still be around."

"Are you serious?" Chemayev took another step forward. "Lebedev was here?"

March came smoothly, effortlessly to his feet — like a cobra rising from a basket. He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "Hey, Yuri! Got a man wants to see ya!" He cocked his head, listening for a response. "Nope," he said at length. "No Yuri."

Chemayev shrugged off his jacket and draped it over a shoulder. March's disrespect for him was unmistakable, but he was uncertain of the Irishman's intent. He couldn't decide whether it would be safer to confront him or to walk away and chance that March would follow him into the thickets. "Do you know where the door to Yuri's office is?"

"I could probably find it if I was in the mood. Why don't you just poke around? Maybe you'll get lucky."

Confrontation, thought Chemayev, would be the safer choice — he did not want this man sneaking up on him.

"What is this all about?" He gave a pained gesture with his jacket, flapping it at March. "This thing you're doing. This...Clint Eastwood

villain thing. What is it? Have you been sent to kill me? Does Polutin think I'm untrustworthy?"

"My oh my," said March. "Could it be I've made an error in judgment? Here I thought you were just another sack of fish eggs and potato juice, and now you've gone all brave on me." He extended his arms toward Chemayev, rotated them in opposite directions. The tattoos crawled like beetles across his skin, causing his muscles to appear even more sinewy than they were. In the half-light the seamed lines on his face were inked with shadow, like ritual scarifications. "Okay," he said. "Okay. Why don't we have us a chat, you and I? A settling of the waters. We'll pretend we're a coupla old whores tipsy on lager and lime." He dropped again into a cross-legged posture and with a flourish held up his right hand — palm on edge — by his head. Then he drew the hand across his face, pretending to push aside his dour expression, replacing it with a boyish smile. "There now," he said. "What shall we talk about?"

Chemayev lowered into a squat. "You can answer my questions for a start."

"Now that's a problem, that is. I fucking hate being direct. Takes all the charm out of a conversation." March rolled his neck, popping the vertebrae. "Wouldn't you prefer to hear about my childhood?"

"No need," said Chemayev. "I used to work in a kennel."

"You're missing out on a grand tale," said March. "I was all the talk of Kilmorgan when I was a lad." He gathered his hair behind his neck. "I foresee this is not destined to be a enjoyable conversation. So I'll tell you what I know. Your Mister Polutin feels you're on the verge of making a serious mistake, and he's engaged me to show you the error of your ways."

"What sort of mistake?"

"Ah! Now that, you see, I do not know." March grinned. "I'm merely the poor instrument of his justice."

Chemayev slipped off his shoulder harness, folded it on top of his coat; he did the same with his money belt. "So Polutin has sent you to punish me? To beat me?"

"He's left the degree of punishment up to yours truly," March said. "You have to understand, I like to think of myself as a teacher. But if the pupil isn't capable of being taught...and you'd be surprised how often that's the case. Then extreme measures are called for. When that happens

there's likely to be what you might call a morbid result." He squinted, as if trying to make out Chemayev through a fog. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Petrified," said Chemayev.

March chuckled. "You've every right to be confident. You've got about a yard of height and reach on me. And what...? Maybe a stone and a half, two stone in weight? By the looks of things I'm vastly over-matched."

"How much is Polutin paying you?"

"Let's not go down that path, Viktor. It's unworthy of you. And disrespectful to me as well."

"You misunderstand." Chemayev tossed his shirt on top of the money belt. "I simply wish to learn how much I'll profit from breaking your neck."

March hopped to his feet. "You're a hell of a man in your own back yard, I'm certain. But you're in a harsher world now, Viktor old son." He gave his head a shake, working out a tightness in his neck. "Yes, indeed. A world terrible, pitiless, and strange. With no room a'tall for mistakes and your humble servant, Niall March, for a fucking welcome wagon."

Chemayev took great satisfaction in resorting to the physical. In a fight all of the vagueness of life became comprehensible. Frustration made itself into a fist; nameless fears manifested in the flexing of a muscle. The pure principles of victory and defeat flushed away the muddle of half-truths and evasions that generally clotted his moral apparatus. He felt cleansed of doubt, possessed of keen conviction. And so when he smiled at March, dropping into a wrestler's crouch, it was not only a show of confidence but an expression of actual pleasure. They began to circle one another, testing their footing, feinting. In the first thirty seconds March launched a flurry of kicks that Chemayev absorbed on his arms, but the force of each blow drove him backward. It had been plain from the outset that March was quick, but Chemayev hadn't realized the efficiency with which he could employ his speed. The man skipped and jittered over the uneven terrain, one moment graceful, dancing, then shuffling forward in the manner of a boxer, then a moment later sinking into an apelike crouch and lashing out with a kick from ground level. Chemayev had intended to wait for the perfect moment to attack, but now he understood that if he waited, March was likely to land a kick cleanly; he would have to risk

creating an opening. And when March next came into range he dove at the man's back leg, bringing him down hard onto the stones.

The two men grabbed and countered, each trying to roll the other and gain the upper position, their breath coming in grunts. March's quickness and flexibility made him difficult to control. After a struggle Chemayev managed to turn him onto his back and started to come astride his chest; but March's legs scissored his waist, forcing him into a kneeling position, and they were joined almost like lovers, one wobbling above, the other on his back, seemingly vulnerable. Chemayev found he was able to strike downward at March's face, but his leverage was poor, the blows weak, and March blocked most of them with his arms, evaded others by twitching his head to the side. Soon Chemayev grew winded. He braced himself on his left hand, intending to throw a powerful right that would penetrate the Irishman's guard; but with a supple, twisting movement, March barred Chemayev's braced arm with his forearm, holding it in place, and levered it backward, dislocating the elbow.

Chemayev screamed and flung himself away, clutching his arm above the elbow, afraid to touch the injury itself. The pain brought tears to his eyes, and for a moment he thought he might faint. Even after the initial burning shock had dissipated, the throbbing of the joint was nearly unbearable. He staggered to his feet, shielding the injury, so disoriented that when he tried to find March, he turned toward the trees.

"Over here, Viktor!" March was standing by the fountain, taking his ease. Chemayev made to back away, got his feet tangled, and inadvertently lurched toward him — the jolt of each step triggered a fresh twinge in his arm. His brain was sodden, empty of plan or emotion, as if he were drunk to the point of passing out.

"What d'ye think, sweetheart?" said March. "Am I man enough for you, or are you pining yet for young Tommy down at the pub?" He took a stroll away from the fountain, an angle that led him closer to Chemayev but not directly toward him. He spun in a complete circle, whirling near, and kicked Chemayev in the head.

A white star detonated inside Chemayev's skull and he fell, landing on his injured elbow. The pain caused him to lose consciousness and when he came to, when his eyes were able to focus, he found March squatting troll-like beside him, a little death incarnate with curses in the black

language scrawled across his skin and long dark hair hiding his face like a cowl.

"Jesus, boyo," he said with mock compassion. "That was a bad 'un. Couple more like that, we'll be hoisting a pint in your honor and telling lies about the great deeds you done in your days of nature."

Chemayev began to feel his elbow again — that and a second pain in the side of his face. He tasted blood in his mouth and wondered if his cheekbone was broken. He closed his eyes.

"Have you nothing to say? Well, I'll leave you to mend for a minute or two. Then we'll have our chat."

Chemayev heard March's footsteps retreating. A thought was forming in the bottom of his brain, growing strong enough to sustain itself against grogginess and pain. It pushed upward, surfacing like a bubble from a tar pit, and he realized it was only a mental belch of fear and hatred. He opened his eyes and was fascinated by the perspective — a view across the lumpy rounded tops of the cobblestones. He imagined them to be bald gray midgets buried to their eyebrows in the earth. He pushed feebly at the stones with his good arm and after inordinate labor succeeded in getting to his hands and knees. Dizzy, he remained in that position a while, his head hung down. Blood dripping from his mouth spotted the stones beneath him. When he tried to stand his legs refused to straighten; he sat back clumsily, supporting himself with his right hand.

"A beating's a terrible thing," said March from somewhere above. "But sometimes it's the only medicine. You understand, don't you, Viktor? I'll wager you've handed out a few yourself. What with you being such a badass and all." He was silent for a couple of ticks. "Polutin assures me you're a bright lad. And I'm inclined to agree...though I'm not sure I'd go so far as saying you're a bloody genius. Which is Polutin's view of the matter. He's an absolute fan of your mental capacities. If mental capacity was rock and roll he'd be front row at all your concerts, blowing kisses and tossing up his room key wrapped in a pair of knickers." Another pause. "Am I getting through to you, Viktor?"

Chemayev nodded, a movement that set his cheekbone to throbbing more fiercely.

"That's good." March's legs came into view. "According to Polutin, your talents lie in your ability to organize facts. He tells me you can take

a newspaper, the *Daily Slobova* or whatever rag it is you boys subscribe to, and from the facts you've gathered in a single read, you're able devise a money-making scheme no one's thought of before. Now that's impressive. I'm fucking impressed, and I don't impress easy. So here's what I'm asking, Viktor. I'm asking you to marshal that massive talent of yours and organize the facts I'm about to present. Can you handle that?"

"Yes," said Chemayev, not wanting to risk another nod. His elbow was feeling stronger and he wondered if the fall might not have jammed the bone back into its socket. He shifted his left arm, and though pain returned in force, he seemed to have mobility.

"All right," said March. "Here we go. First fact. Polutin loves you like a son. That may seem farfetched, considering the crap he rubs in your face. But it's what he tells me. And it's for certain fathers have treated sons a great deal worse than he treats you. Love's too strong a word, perhaps. But there's definitely paternal feelings involved. Why he'd want a son, now, I've no idea. The thought of fathering a child turns my stomach. The little bollocks start out pissing on your hand and wind up spitting in your face and stealing the rent money. But I had a troubled upbringing, so I'm not the best judge of these things."

He paced off to the side, moving beyond Chemayev's field of vision. "Second fact. Whatever game you've been playing, it's over. Terminated. Done. And by the way, I'll be wanting you to tell me exactly what it was. Every last detail. But that can wait till you've got the roses back in your cheeks. Third fact. You've made one mistake. You can't afford another. Are you following me, Viktor? You're on the brink of oblivion with ten toes over the edge. No more mistakes or you're going to fall a long, long way and hit the ground screaming." March's legs came back into view. "Fact number four. God is dead. The certain hope of the Resurrection is a pile of shite. You have my word on it. I've seen to the other side and I know."

Chemayev found he could make a fist with his left hand. To test his strength he tightened it, fingernails cutting into his palm. March's voice was stirring up a windy noise inside his head, like the rush of traffic on a highway.

"There you have it, Viktor. Four little facts. Organize away. Turn 'em over in your mind. See if you can come up with a scheme for living."

Chemayev wanted badly to satisfy March, to avoid further punishment; but the facts with which he had been presented offered little room for scheming. Instead they formed four walls, the walls of the lightless world in which he had been confined before meeting Larissa. It occurred to him that this was exactly what March wished him to conclude and that he could satisfy him by saying as much. But the thought of Larissa charged him with stubbornness. She was the fifth fact he could not ignore, the fact that had shattered those walls. Thanks to her there was a sixth fact, a seventh, an infinity of fact waiting to be explored.

"It's no brainbuster, Viktor. I'm not the least gifted when it comes to organization. Fuck, I can't even balance my checkbook. But even I can figure this one out."

As if his engine had begun to idle out Chemayev's energy lapsed. He grew cold and the cold slowed his thoughts, replaced them with a foggy desire to lie down and sleep. March put a hand on his shoulder, gave him a shake, and pain lanced along his cheekbone. The touch renewed his hatred, and braced by adrenaline, he let hate empower him.

"C'mon, lad." March said with a trace of what seemed actual concern in his voice. "Tell me what you know."

"I understand," said Chemayev shakily.

"Understand what?"

"I have a...a good situation. A future. I'd be a fool to jeopardize it."

"Four stars!" said March. "Top of the charts in the single leap! See what I told you, Viktor? A kick in the head can enlighten even the most backward amongst us. It's a fucking miracle cure." He kneeled beside Chemayev. "There's one more thing I need to tell you. Perhaps you've been wondering why, with all the rude boys about in Moscow, our Mister Polutin hired in a Mick to do his dirty work. Truth is, Russki muscle is just not suited to subtlety. Those boys get started on you, they won't stop till the meat's off the bone. I'm considered something of a specialist. A saver of souls, as it were. You're not my only project. Far from it! Your country has a great many sinners. But you're my top priority. I intend to be your conscience. Should temptation rear its ugly head, there I'll be, popping up over your shoulder. Cautioning you not to stray. Keep that well in mind, Viktor. Make it the marrow of your existence. For that's what it is, and don't you go thinking otherwise." March stood, reached

down and took Chemayev's right arm. "Come on now," he said. "Let's get you up."

Standing, it looked to Chemayev that the stones beneath his feet were miles away, the surface of a lumpy planet seen from space. A shadowy floater cluttered his vision. The white leaves each had a doubled image and March's features, rising from the pale seamy ground of his skin, made no sense as a face — like landmarks on a map without referents.

"Can you walk?" March asked.

"I don't know."

March positioned himself facing Chemayev and examined him with a critical eye. "We better have you looked at. You might have a spot of concussion." He adjusted his grip on Chemayev's shoulders. "I'm going to carry you...just so's you know I'm not taking liberties. I'll come back after and get your things."

He bent at the knees and waist, preparing to pick Chemayev up in a fireman's carry. Without the least forethought or inkling of intent, acting out of reflex or muscle memory, or perhaps goaded by the sour smell of March's sweat, Chemayev slipped his right forearm under March's throat, applying a headlock; then with all his strength he wrenched the Irishman up off his feet. March gurgled, flailed, kicked. And Chemayev, knowing that he only had to hang on a few seconds more, came full into his hatred. He heard himself yelling with effort, with the anticipation of victory, and he dug the grip deeper into March's throat. Then March kicked out with his legs so that for the merest fraction of a second he was horizontal to the true. When his legs swung down again the momentum carried Chemayev's upper body down as well, and March's feet struck the ground. Lithe as an eel, he pushed himself into a backflip, his legs flying over Chemayev's head, breaking the hold and sending them both sprawling onto the stones.

By the time Chemayev recovered March had gotten to his feet and was bent over at the edge of the circle, rubbing his throat. Stupefied, only dimly aware of the danger he faced, Chemayev managed to stand and set off stumbling toward the trees. But the Irishman hurried to cut him off, still holding his throat.

"Are you mad, Viktor?" he said hoarsely. "There's no other explanation. Fuck!" He massaged his throat more vigorously, stretched his neck. "That's as close as I've come. I'll give you that much."

Chemayev's legs wanted to bend in odd directions. It felt as if some organ in his head, a scrap of flesh he never knew existed, had been torn free and was flipping about like a minnow in a bait bucket.

Strands of hair were stuck to March's cheek; he brushed them back, adjusted the waist of his trousers. "It's the girl, isn't it? Liza...Louisa. Whatever her fucking name is. Back when I was of a mood for female companionship, there were more than a few knocked my brains loose. They'll make a man incorrigible. Immune to even the most sensible of teachings."

Chemayev glanced about, groggily certain that there must be an avenue of escape he had overlooked.

"I remember this one in particular," said March as he approached. "Evvie was her name. Evvie Mahone. She wasn't the most gorgeous item on the shelf. But she was nice-looking, y'know. A country girl. Come to Dublin for the university. Wild and red-cheeked and full of spirit, with lovely great milky bosoms, and a frizzy mane of ginger hair hanging to her ass that she could never comb out straight. I was over the moon ten times round about her. When we were courting we'd sit together for hours outside her dormitory, watching the golden days turn to gray, touching and talking soft while crowds moved past us without noticing, like we were two people who'd fallen so hard for one another we'd turned to stone. Our hearts just too pure to withstand the decay and disappointment of the world." He stepped close to Chemayev, inches away — a wise white monkey with a creased, pouchy face and eyes as active as beetles. "After we became lovers we'd lie naked in the casement window of her room with a blanket around us, watching stars burn holes in the black flag flying over the Liffey. I swear to God I thought all the light was coming from her body, and there was music playing then that never existed...yet I still hear its strains. Is it like that for you, Viktor? That grand and all-consuming? I reckon it must be."

March clasped Chemayev's shoulder with his left hand, as if in camaraderie; he made a fist of his right. "Love," he said wistfully. "It's a wonderful thing."

Chemayev was not witness to much of the beating that then ensued; a punch he never saw coming broke his connection with painful reality

and sent him whirling down into the black lights of unconsciousness. When he awoke he discovered to his surprise that he was no longer in pain — to his further surprise he found that he was unable to move, a circumstance that should have alarmed him more than it did. It was not that he felt at peace, but rather as if he'd been sedated, the intensity of his possessive attitude toward mortality tuned down several notches and his attention channeled into a stuporous appreciation of the blurred silver beam hanging in the darkness overhead...like a crossbeam in the belly of a great ark constructed of negative energy. He could hear water splashing, and a lesser sound he soon recognized to be the guttering of his breath. He thought of Larissa, then tried not to think of her. The memory of her face, all her bright particularity, disturbed the strange equilibrium that allowed him to float on the surface of this pain-free, boundless place. But after a while he became able to summon her without anxiety, without longing overmuch, content to contemplate her the way an Orthodox saint painted on an ikon might gaze at an apparition of the Virgin. Full of wonder and daft regard. Soon she came to be the only thing he wanted to think of, the idolon and mistress of his passage.

Things were changing inside him. He pictured conveyor belts being turned off, systems cooling, microbes filing out of his factory stomach on the final day of operation, leaving their machines running and all the taps going drip drip drip. It was amusing, really. To have feared this. It was easier by far than anything that had preceded it. Though fear nibbled at the edges of his acceptance, he remained essentially secure beneath his black comforter and his silver light and his love. The thought of death, once terrifying, now seemed only unfortunate. And when he began to drift upward, slowly approaching the light, he speculated that it might not even be unfortunate, that March had been wrong about God and the hope of the Resurrection. Beneath him the garden and its pagan central element were receding, and lying with its arms out and legs spread not far from the ruined fountain, his bloody, wide-eyed body watched him go. He fixed on the silver light, expecting, hoping to see and hear the faces and voices of departed souls greeting him, the blissful creatures that patrolled the border between life and true eternity, and the white beast Jesus in all Its majesty, crouched and roaring the joyful noise that ushered in the newly risen to the sacred plane. But then he sensed an erosion, a turmoil taking

place on some fundamental level that he had previously failed to apprehend. Fragments of unrelated memory flew at him in a hail, shattering his calm. Images that meant nothing. A wooden flute he'd played as a child. An old man's gassed, wheezing voice. Sparks corkscrewing up a chimney. Pieces of a winter day in the country. Shards of broken mental crockery that shredded the temporary cloth of his faith, allowing terror to seep through the rents. Real terror, this. Not the fakes he'd experienced previously, the rich fears bred in blood and bone, but an empty, impersonal terror that was itself alive, a being larger than all being, the vacuous ground upon which our illusion breeds, that we never let ourselves truly believe is there, yet underlies every footstep ever taken...gulping him down into its cold and voiceless scream, while all he knew and loved and was went scattering.

TREMBLING AND SWEATY, Chemayev stared at the television set above the bar. A brown-haired teenage girl in a denim jacket and jeans was hitchhiking on a desert road, singing angrily — if you could judge by her expression — at the cars that passed her by. He watched numbly as she caught a ride in a dusty van. Then, astounded by the realization he was alive, that the girl was not part of the storm of memory that had assailed his dying self, he heaved up from the barstool and looked avidly about, not yet convinced of the authenticity of what he saw. About a dozen people sitting at various tables; the bartender talking to two male customers. The recessed door beside the fireplace opened and a woman in a black cocktail dress came into the lounge and stood searching the tables for someone. Still shaky, Chemayev sat back down.

All that had happened in the garden remained with him, but he could examine it now. Not that examination helped. Explanations occurred. He'd been given a drug in a glass of Yuri's special reserve — probably a hypnotic. Shown a film that triggered an illusion. But this fathered the need for other explanations. Was the object of the exercise to intimidate him? Were the things March had said to him about Polutin part of the exercise? Were they actual admonitions or the product of paranoia? Of course it had all been some sort of hallucination. Likely an orchestrated one. He could see that clearly. But despite the elements of fantasy —

March's lyric fluency, the white trees, and so on — he couldn't devalue the notion that it had also had some quality of the real. The terror of those last moments, spurious though they had been, was still unclouded in his mind. He could touch it, taste it. The greedy blackness that had been about to suck him under...he knew to his soul *that* was real. The memory caused his thoughts to dart in a hundred different directions, like a school of fish menaced by a shadow. He concentrated on his breathing, trying to center himself. Real or unreal, what did it matter? The only question of any significance was, Who could have engineered this? It wasn't Polutin's style. Although March surely was. March was made to order for Polutin. The alternative explanations — magical vodka, mysterious Lebedevian machinations — didn't persuade him; but neither could he rule them out.... Suddenly electrified with fright, remembering his appointment, thinking he'd missed it, he peered at his watch. Only eleven minutes had passed since he'd drunk the vodka. It didn't seem possible, yet the clock behind the bar showed the same time. He had fifteen minutes left to wait. He patted his pocket, felt the airline tickets. Touched the money belt. Pay Yuri, he told himself. Sign the papers. There'd be time to think later. Or maybe none of it was worth thinking about. He studied himself in the mirror. Tried a smile, straightened his tie unnecessarily, wiped his mouth. And saw Niall March's reflection wending his way among the tables toward the bar. Toward him.

"I was hoping I'd run into you," March said, dropping onto the stool beside Chemayev. "Listen, mate. I want to apologize for giving you a hard time back there in the fucking ice palace. I wasn't meself. I've been driving around with that bastard Polutin all day. Listening to him jabber and having to kiss his fat ass has me ready to chew the tit off the Virgin. Can I buy you a drink?"

Totally at sea, Chemayev managed to say, no thanks, he'd had enough for one evening.

"When I can no longer hear that insipid voice, that's when I'll know I've had enough." March hailed the bartender. "Still and all, he's a fair sort, your boss. We held opposing positions on a business matter over in London a while back. He lost a couple of his boys, but apparently he's not a man to let personal feelings intrude on his good judgment. We've been working together ever since."

Chemayev had it in mind to disagree with the proposition that Polutin did not let personal feelings interfere with judgment — it was his feeling that the opposite held true; but March caught the bartender's eye and said, "You don't have any British beer, do you? Fuck! Then give me some clear piss in a glass." The bartender stared at him without comprehension. "Vodka," said March; then, to Chemayev: "What sorta scene do you got going on here? It's like some kind of fucking czarist disco. With gangsters instead of the Romanovs. I mean, is it like a brotherhood, y'know? Sons of the Revolution or some such?"

The bartender set down his vodka. March drained the glass. "No offense," he said. "But I hate this shit. It's like drinking shoe polish." He glanced sideways at Chemayev. "You're not the most talkative soul I've encountered. Sure you're not holding a grudge?"

"No," said Chemayev, reigning in the impulse to look directly at March, to try and pierce the man's affable veneer and determine the truth of what lay beneath. "I'm just...anxious. I have an important meeting."

"Oh, yeah? Who with?"

"Yuri Lebedev."

"The fucking Buddha himself, huh? Judging by what I've seen of his establishment, that should be a frolic." March called to the bartender, held up his empty glass. "Not only does this stuff taste like the sweat off a pig's balls, but I seem immune to it."

"If you keep drinking...." Chemayev said, and lost his train of thought. He was having trouble equating this chatty, superficial March with either of the man's two previous incarnations — the sullen, reptilian assassin and the poetic martial arts wizard.

"What's that?" March grabbed the second vodka the instant the bartender finished pouring and flushed it down.

"Nothing," said Chemayev. He had no capacity for judgment left; the world had become proof against interpretation.

March turned on his stool to face the tables, resting his elbows on the bar. "Drink may not be your country's strong suit," he said, "but I'm forced to admit your women have it all over ours. I'm not saying Irish girls aren't pretty. God, no! When they're new pennies, ah...they're such a blessing. But over here it's like you've got the fucking franchise for long legs and cheekbones." He winked at Chemayev. "If Ireland ever gets an

economy, we'll trade you straight-up booze for women — that way we'll both make out." He swiveled back to face the mirror, and looked into the eyes of Chemayev's reflection. "I suppose your girlfriend's a looker."

Chemayev nodded glumly. "Yes...yes, she is."

March studied him a moment more. "Well, don't let it get you down, okay?" He gave Chemayev a friendly punch on the arm and eased off the stool. "I've got to be going." He stuck out his hand. "Pals!" he said. With reluctance, Chemayev accepted the hand. March's grip was strong, but not excessively so. "Brothers in the service of the great ship Polutin," he said. "That's us."

He started off, then looked back pleadingly at Chemayev. "Y'know where the loo...the men's room is?"

"No," said Chemayev, too distracted to give directions. "I'm sorry. No."

"Christ Jesus!" March grimaced and grabbed his crotch. "It better not be far. My back teeth are floating."

THE WALLS of the corridor that led to Yuri's office were enlivened by a mural similar to the mosaic that covered the bar in the lounge — a crowd of people gathered at a cocktail party, many of them figures from recent Russian history, the faces of even the anonymous ones rendered with such a specificity of detail, it suggested that the artist had used models for all of them. Every thirty feet or so the mural was interrupted by windows of one-way glass that offered views of small gaudy rooms, some empty, others occupied by men and women engaged in sex. However, none of this distracted Chemayev from his illusory memory of death. It dominated his mental landscape, rising above the moil of lesser considerations like a peak lifting from a sea of clouds. He couldn't escape the notion that it had been premonitory and that the possibility of death lay between him and a life of comfortable anonymity in America.

He rounded a bend and saw ahead an alcove furnished with a sofa, a coffee table, and a TV set — on the screen a husky bearded man was playing the accordion, belting out an old folk tune. Two women in white jumpsuits were embracing on the sofa, unmindful of Chemayev's approach. As he walked up the taller of the two, a pale Nordic blond with

high cheekbones and eyes the color of aquamarines, unzipped her lover's jumpsuit to expose the swells of her breasts...and that action triggered Chemayev's memory. He'd seen this before. On the TV in the bar. Just prior to entering the garden where he had fought with March. The same women, the same sofa. Even the song was the same that had been playing then — the lament of a transplanted city dweller for the joys of country life. He must have cried out or made a noise of some sort, for the smaller woman — also a blond, younger and softer of feature — gave a start and closed her jumpsuit with a quick movement, making a tearing sound with the zipper that stated her mood as emphatically as her mean-spirited stare.

"You must be Viktor," the taller woman said cheerfully, getting to her feet. "Larissa's friend."

Chemayev admitted to the fact.

"I'm Nataliya." She extended a hand, gave his a vigorous shake. The sharpness of her features contrived a caricature of beauty, the hollows of her pale cheeks so pronounced they brought to mind the fracture planes of a freshly calved iceberg. "I am also friends with Larissa," she said. "Perhaps she has told you about me?"

"I don't know," Chemayev said. "Perhaps. I think so."

Before he could voice any of the questions that occurred to him she caught his arm and said, "Come. I'll take you to Yuri." Then turning to her lover, she said, "I'll be back as soon as I can." The smaller woman let out an angry sniff and pretended to be absorbed in watching the TV.

Nataliya led him along the corridor, chattering about Larissa. What a sweetheart she was, how kind she was to the other girls, even those who didn't deserve it. God knows, there were some impossible bitches working here. Take that cunt Nadezhda. This scrawny redhead from Pyatigorsk. Her father had stolen from Yuri and now his little darling was keeping him alive by faking orgasms with drunks and perverts. You should have seen her the day she arrived. A real mess! Weeping and shivering. But after a couple of weeks, after she realized she wasn't going to be raped or beaten, she started acting like Catherine the Great. Lots of girls went through a phase like that. It was only natural. Most came from awful situations and once they felt they had a little power, you expected them to get a swelled head. But Nadezhda had been here a year and every day she grew more intolerable. Putting on airs. Bragging about the rich men who wanted to

set her up in an apartment or buy her a *dacha*. And now — Nataliya's laugh sounded as if she were clearing her throat to spit — now she claimed some mystery man was going to pay her debt to Yuri and marry her. Everyone tried to tell her these things never worked out. Hadn't lying beneath a different man every night taught her anything? In the first place, why would a man take a whore to wife when he could have what he wanted for a far less exacting price? Love? What a joke! Men didn't love women, they loved the way women made them feel about themselves. Most of them, that is. The ones who did fall in love with you, the ones who were fool enough to surrender their power to a woman....because that's what love was in essence, wasn't it? A kind of absolute surrender. Well, you had to be suspicious of those types, didn't you? You had to believe some weakness of character was involved.

To this point Chemayev had been listening with half an ear, more concerned with the significance of having run into these women from his dream, trying fruitlessly to recall how the dream had proceeded after he had seen them, and thinking that he should turn back so as to avoid what might prove to be a real confrontation with March, but now he searched Nataliya's face for a sign that she might be commenting on his particular situation. She did not appear to notice his increased attentiveness and continued gossiping about the pitiful Nadezhda. She'd never liked the bitch, she said, but now she was about to get her comeuppance, you had to feel badly for her. Maybe she wasn't really a bitch, maybe she was just an idiot. And maybe that was why Larissa had befriended her.... Nataliya stopped as they came abreast of yet another window, touched Chemayev on the shoulder, and said, "There's Yuri now."

In the room beyond the glass, its walls and furniture done in shades of violet, a pasty round-shouldered man with a dolorous, jowly face and thin strands of graying hair combed over a mottled scalp stood at the foot of a large bed, seeming at loose ends. He had on slacks and an unbuttoned shirt from which his belly protruded like an uncooked dumpling, and he was rubbing his hips with broad, powerful-looking hands. Chemayev had seen Yuri on numerous occasions — or rather he had seen the man who officiated at the nightly auctions — but he had never been this close to any of the doubles, and despite the man's unprepossessing mien, or perhaps because of it, because his drab commonality echoed that of the old Soviet dinosaurs,

the Krushchevs, the Andropovs, the Malenkovs, he felt a twinge of fear.

"Is that him?" he asked Nataliya.

She looked uncertain, then brightened. "You mean the one you're expecting to meet? He's upstairs. At the party."

"What are you talking about? What party?"

"At Yuri's place."

"His office?"

"His office...his apartment. It's all the same. He's got an entire floor. The party's been going on since Eternity opened. Eleven, twelve years now. It never shuts down. Don't worry. You'll do your business and meet some fascinating people."

Chemayev studied the double, who was shuffling about, touching things, pursing his lips as though in disapproval. He did not appear to be the magical adept of Polutin's description, but of course this was not the real Yuri — who could say what form he'd taken for himself?

"If you want to finish by the time Larissa gets off work," Nataliya said, "we'd better hurry."

"She's not working tonight," Chemayev said, still intrigued by the double.

"Sure she is. I saw her not half an hour ago. She was this young blond guy. A real pretty boy. Her last client of the night...or so she said."

She said this so off-handedly, Chemayev didn't believe she was lying. "She told me she didn't have to work tonight."

"What's she supposed to tell you? She's going to throw some asshole a fuck? You know what she does. She cares for you, so she lied. Big surprise!"

What Nataliya had told him seemed obvious, patently true; nonetheless Chemayev was left with a feeling of mild stupor, like the thick-headedness that comes with the onset of flu, before it manifests as fever and congestion. He leaned against the wall.

"The amazing thing is, you believed her," she said. "Who'd you think you were involved with? Lying's second nature to a whore."

"She's not a whore," he said, half under his breath.

Nataliya pushed her sharp face close to his. "No? What could she be then? A missionary? A nurse?"

"She didn't have a choice. She...."

"Sure! That explains it! Every other girl who becomes a whore has a choice, but not sweet Larissa." Nataliya made a dry sound in the back of her throat, like a cat hissing. "You're pathetic!"

Chemayev hung his head, giving in to the dead weight of his skull. To graphic images of Larissa in bed. It was unreasonable to feel betrayed under such circumstances, yet that was how he felt. He wanted to run, to put distance between himself and the corridor, but the violet room seemed to exert a tidal influence on his mood, pulling his sense of betrayal into a dangerous shape, and he had the urge to batter the window, to break through and tear Yuri's double apart.

"Want to watch? They're probably going at it in one of the rooms. I bet we can find them." Nataliya tugged at his jacket. "Come on! Treat yourself! I won't say a thing to Larissa."

Chemayev shoved her away, sending her reeling against the opposite wall. "Shut your fucking mouth!"

"Oo — oo — ooh!" Nataliya pretended to cower, holding her white hands like starfish in front of her face, peering through the gaps between her long fingers. "That was very good! Just like a real man!"

Chemayev's head throbbed. "You don't understand," he said. "I'm paying off her debt. We're planning to go away...to marry."

Nataliya was silent for a bit, then: "And now you're not? That's what you're saying? Now you've realized your whore is really a whore, you intend to abandon her?"

"No...that's not it."

"Then why waste time? Keep your appointment. Pay the money. You'll forget about this."

Chemayev thought this was good advice, but he couldn't muster the energy to follow it. His mental wattage had dimmed, as if he were experiencing a brown-out.

Nataliya leaned against the wall beside him.. "What I said about Nadezhda...about her telling us someone was going to pay her debt. I bet Larissa told her about you, and she took the story for her own. She does that sort of thing. Takes scraps of other people's lives and sews them into an autobiography." She looked off along the corridor. "I'm sorry for what I said. If I'd known it was you and Larissa...." Her voice lost some value, some richness. "Maybe it'll be different for you two."

Her solicitude, which Chemayev suspected was only prelude to further abuse, snapped him out of his funk. "No need to apologize," he said. "I haven't taken anything you've said seriously." He headed off along the corridor.

"Oh...right! You have the surety of love to support your convictions." Nataliya fell into step beside him. "I'm curious about love. Me, I've never experienced it. Mind telling me what it's like?"

Chemayev's headache grew worse; he increased his pace. They came round a sharp bend and he saw an elevator door ahead.

"All I want's a hint, you understand. Just tell me something you know about Larissa. Something only you with your lover's eye can see."

Enraged, Chemayev spun her about to face him. "Don't talk anymore! Just take me to Yuri!"

Half-smiling, she knocked his hands away and walked toward the elevator; then she glanced back, smiling broadly now. "Is this how you treat her? No wonder she lies to you."

Inside the cramped elevator, chest-to-chest with Nataliya, Chemayev fixed his eyes on a point above the silky curve of her scalp and studied the image of Stalin's KVD chief, Beria — the mural on the walls repeated the motif of those in the corridor and the bar, but here the figures were larger, giving the impression that they were passengers in the car. Contemplating this emblem of Soviet authority eased the throbbing in his head. Maybe, he thought, in the presence of such an evil ikon his own sins were diminished and thus became less capable of producing symptoms such as anxiety and headaches. The old thug looked dapper, dressed in a double-breasted blue suit, sporting a red flower in his lapel instead of a hammer-and-sickle pin, quite different from the photographs Chemayev had seen in which he'd worn executioner's black. His quizzical expression and pince-nez gave him the air of a schoolteacher, stern yet caring, a man whom you'd detest when you studied under him, but whom you would respect years later when you realized the value of the lessons he'd taught. Not at all the sort of character to preside over purges and summary executions, watching from a distance, betraying no more emotion than would a beetle perched on a leaf.

Inching upward, the elevator creaked and groaned — the sounds of a torture chamber. The exhausted cries of victims, the straining of

mechanical torments. Nothing like the noiseless efficiency of the one that had brought him to the theater. The car lurched, passing a floor, and Chemayev's thoughts, too, lurched. He reawakened to Nataliya's presence, felt her eyes on him. Bitch. He wanted to beam the word into her brain. What right did she have to ask him personal questions? *Tell me something you know about Larissa, something only you with your lover's eye can see.* What did she expect? That he'd bare his soul to her? Fat chance! There were lots of things he could have told her, though. A year-and-a-half's worth of things. Thousands of intimate observations. The problem was, his head hurt too much at the moment for him to think of any.

The elevator door rattled open and Chemayev stepped out into a corridor with cement walls, smelling of urine and vomit, illuminated by the ghastly dim light from an overhead bulb. The floor was littered with empty bottles, crushed plastic containers, soggy newspapers, dead cigarette packs, used condoms. Partially unearthed from a mound of debris, a crumpled Pepsi can glittered like treasure. Heavy metal blasted from somewhere close by. At the far end of the corridor a lumpish old man with stringy gray hair falling to his shoulders was wielding a mop, feebly pushing a mound of trash into the shadowy space beneath a stairwell. Along the walls stood buckets of sand — for use in case of fire. Chemayev turned to Nataliya, who gestured for him to proceed. As they passed, the old man peered at him through the gray snakes of his hair, his face twisted into a frown, and he smacked his lips as if trying to rid himself of a nasty taste.

If Chemayev had any doubt as to where he stood, it was dispelled by what he saw from the window at the foot of the stairs — he was gazing down onto the parking lot of Eternity, a view that could only be achieved from high up in one of the *krushovas*. This surprised him, but he was becoming accustomed to Yuri Lebedev's curious logic. As he started up the stairs, the music was switched off and he heard voices in the corridor above. At the top of the stairs, lounging against a wall, were two men in jeans and leather jackets, one with a shaved scalp, nursing a Walkman to his breast, and the other with a mohawk that had been teased into a rooster's crest. They eyed Chemayev with contempt. The man with the Mohawk blew Nataliya a kiss. His face was narrow, scarcely any chin and

a big nose, looking as if it had been squeezed in a vise. A pistol was stuck in his belt.

"Private party," he said, blocking Chemayev's path.

"I've got an appointment with Yuri," Chemayev told him.

The bald guy affected a doltish expression. "Yuri? Which Yuri is that?"

"Maybe Yuri Gagarin," said his pal. "Maybe this pussy wants to be an astronaut."

"Better let him pass," said Nataliya. "My friend's a real assassin. A faggot like you doesn't stand a chance with him."

The man with the pistol in his belt made a twitchy move and Chemayev grabbed his hand as it closed around the pistol grip; at the same time he spun the man about and encircled his neck from behind with his left arm, cutting off his wind. The man let go of the pistol and pried at the arm. Chemayev flicked the safety off, pushed the pistol deeper into the man's trousers.

The man's Adam's apple bobbed. "Go easy, okay!"

Chemayev wrenched the gun free and waved both men back against the wall. "Are you crazy?" he asked Nataliya. "Why did you antagonize him?"

She moved off along the corridor, heading for a doorway thronged with partygoers. "I have so few chances to watch you be masterful. Indulge me."

Chemayev shook his forefinger in warning at the two punks and followed her. The pistol — a nine-millimeter — didn't fit his holster; he wedged it in the waistband of his trousers at the small of his back.

The first thing he noticed about the party was that the instant he stepped through the door the stench of the hallway vanished, as if he had penetrated an invisible barrier impermeable to odors. The smells were now those you might expect of any Moscow gathering: perfume, marijuana and cigarette smoke, bad breath, the heat of people pressed together under the sickly lighting, crowded into an unguessable number of rooms. People of every description. Students in sweaters and jeans; old ragged folks with careworn faces, the sort you'd expect to find in the *krushovas*; beautiful women in couturier gowns; street prostitutes — some equally beautiful — in vinyl micro-minis and fake furs; men dressed like Chemayev

himself, members of a *mafiya* or businessmen with more-or-less reputable interests; musicians with guitars and violins and horns; homosexuals in drag; uniformed soldiers; jugglers. In one corner several fit-looking men wearing jerseys tossed a soccer ball back and forth; in another two actors played a scene to an audience consisting of a blond middle-aged woman in a lab coat and thick spectacles, a thickset man in a wrinkled suit, the very image of a Party hack, and a pretty adolescent girl wearing leg warmers over her tights, holding a pair of ballet slippers. On occasion, as Chemayev and Nataliya forged a path, being pinched and fondled and grabbed in the process, incredible sights materialized, as fleeting as flashes of lightning. A geisha's painted face appeared between shoulders; she flicked out a slender forked tongue at Chemayev, then was gone. Soon thereafter he caught sight of a small boy whirling as rapidly as a figure skater, transforming himself into a column of dervish blue light. And not long after that they squeezed past a group of men and women attending a giant with a prognathian jaw and a bulging forehead who, kneeling, was as tall as those gathered around him; he reached out his enormous hands and flickering auras manifested about the heads of those he touched. To someone unfamiliar with Eternity these sights might have seemed miraculous; but to Chemayev, who had witnessed similar curiosities on the stage of the theater, they were evidence of Yuri's talent for illusion. He accepted them in stride and kept pushing ahead. Once he saw a brunette who might have been Larissa laughing flirtatiously on the arm of a slender blond man; he called to her, knocked people aside in his determination to reach her, but she disappeared into the crowd. There were so many people milling about it was impossible to keep track of any single person, and they were of such great variety it seemed a contemporary Noah had scavenged the streets of the endangered city for two of every kind and brought them to this place of relative security, a cross between the Ark and the Tower of Babel. The hubbub, comprised of talking, singing, laughing — indeed, of every sort of human emission — was deafening, and the only impression Chemayev had of the general aspect of the place was derived from the objects that lined the walls. Overflowing bookcases; side-by-side refrigerators; an ornate China closet containing framed photographs; a massive secretary of golden oak; cupboards, reliquaries, travel posters, portraits, a calendar showing the wrong month and a picture of

Siberian wheat fields. Items typical of a middle-class apartment. Smoke dimmed the lighting further, creating an amber haze, twisting with slow torsion into a menagerie of shapes that often appeared identifiable — ephemeral omega signs and kabalistic symbols and mutant Cyrillic characters — beneath which the closely packed heads of the partygoers bobbed and jerked. In various quarters couples were dancing and due to the heat, many — both men and women — had removed their shirts; but because of the overall exuberance and the general lack of attention paid to the topless women, the effect was not truly prurient and had the casual eroticism of a tribal celebration.

Eventually Nataliya and Chemayev forced their way into a large relatively under-populated room. No more than fifteen or sixteen people standing in clusters, some occupying the grouping of couches and easy chairs that dominated the far end. Nataliya drew Chemayev aside. "This is ridiculous," she said. "For all I know we're following Yuri about. Sit down and I'll try to find him."

Oppressed, mentally fatigued, Chemayev was in no mood to argue. Once she had left, he collapsed into an easy chair, let his head fall back and closed his eyes. The workings of his mind were clouded, murky. It was as if the contents of his skull were the interior of a fishbowl that hadn't been cleaned for weeks, the water thickened to a brown emulsion in which a golden glint of movement was visible now and again. Though not altogether pleasant, it was an oddly restful state, and he became irritated when a man's voice intruded, telling a story about two young friends who'd come to Moscow from the north. He tried unsuccessfully to ignore the voice and finally opened his eyes to discover that the room had filled with decrepit, ill-clad men and women, typical denizens of the *krushovas*. The storyteller was hidden among them and his voice — a slurred yet authoritative baritone — was the only one audible.

"There was a special bond between them," the man was saying. "They were both misfits in the life they had chosen — or rather that had chosen them. They were romantics and their circumstance was the very antithesis of the romantic, suppressing the natural expressions of their hearts and souls. Nicolai — the livelier of the pair — he was more grievously affected. He fancied himself a poet. He aspired to be a new Mayakovsky, to give tongue to the millennial monsters taking shape from

the funeral smoke of Communism. A talented, personable fellow. Blond, handsome. For all his bloody deeds, he had something inside him that remained untouched. A core of...not innocence exactly, but a kind of youthful arrogance that counterfeited innocence. That made innocence unnecessary. Who knows what he might have achieved in a more forgiving age?"

This reference to someone named Nicolai and the accompanying description charged Chemayev with new anxiety and caused him to shake off his malaise. He sat up and peered about, trying to locate the speaker. An old woman fixed him with a baleful stare, then turned away. Her faded print dress was hiked up in back, revealing a raddled, purple-veined thigh; one of her grimy stockings had sagged about her calf in folds, like a seven league boot.

"The morning in question," the man went on, "they got up well before dawn and drove to an open market north of the city. You know the sort of place. A muddy field where vendors set up stalls. Farmers selling vegetables and such. An old bus was parked at the edge of the field. It served as an office for Aleksander Fetisov, the small-time criminal they'd been sent to kill. Fetisov had grown dissatisfied with picking up the crumbs that fell from the table of the big shots. He had grand ambitions. But neither his strength nor his ingenuity had proved equal to those ambitions. When he stepped out of the bus with his bodyguards our heroes opened fire from behind the bushes where they had hidden themselves. The farmers ran away.

"Nicolai knelt beside Fetisov's body. He needed proof that they'd done the job. A watch, a ring. Some identifiable token. As his friend searched the dead man's clothing Viktor moved up behind him and aimed a pistol at his head. It would have been merciful if he had pulled the trigger right at that second, but he wasn't committed to the act. He was still trying to think of a way out...even though he knew there was none. He couldn't understand why Polutin had ordered him to kill Nicolai. But for Viktor, lack of understanding was not sufficient cause to break ranks. In this he differed from Nicolai. And of course, though he couldn't see it at the time, this was the reason Polutin had ordered Nicolai's death—he had too much imagination to be a good soldier."

Bewildered and full of dread, Chemayev stood and began making his

way toward the sound of the voice. He knew this story, he was familiar with every detail, but how anyone else could know it was beyond him. The elderly men and women shuffled out of his path clumsily, reluctantly — it seemed he was pushing through a sort of human vegetation, a clinging, malodorous thicket comprised of threadbare dresses, torn sweaters, and blotchy, wrinkled skin.

"Nicolai glanced up from the corpse to discover that his friend had become his executioner. For an instant, he was frozen. But after the initial shock dissipated he made no move to fight or to plead for his life. He just looked at Viktor, a look that seemed fully comprehending, as if he knew everything about the moment. The mechanisms that had created it. Its inevitability. And it was the composition of that look, the fact it contained no element of disappointment, as if what was about to occur was no more nor less than what Nicolai might have expected of his friend...that was the spark that prompted Viktor, at last, to fire. To give him due credit, he wept profusely over the body. At one point he put the gun to his head, intending to end his own life. But that, certainly, was an act to which he was not committed."

Standing near the door, his back to Chemayev, the center of the *krushova* dwellers' attention, was a squat black-haired man in a blue serge suit. Chemayev stepped in front of him and stared into the unblinking eyes of Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria, his clothing identical in every respect to that worn by the painted image in the elevator, complete down to the pince-nez perched on his nose and the red blossom in his lapel. Flabbergasted, Chemayev fell back a step.

"If it were up to me," Beria said, "I'd have you shot. Not because you betrayed your friend — in that you were only carrying out an order. But your penchant for self-recrimination interferes with the performance of your duty. That is reprehensible." He clicked his tongue against his teeth and regarded Chemayev dourly. "I suspect you'd like to know how I came to hear the story I've been telling my comrades. No doubt you're trying to rationalize my presence. Perhaps you've concluded that if Yuri could create doubles for himself, he might well have created a double for Beria. Perhaps you're thinking that when Lev Polutin sent you and Nicolai to kill Fetisov, he also sent a spy to make certain you did the job right, and that this spy is my source. That would be the logical explanation. At least

according to the lights of your experience. But let me assure you, such is not the case."

Having recovered his poise somewhat, Chemayev seized on this explanation as if it were a rope that had been lowered from the heavens to lift him free of earthly confusion. "I'm sick of this shit!" he said, grabbing Beria by the lapels. "Tell me where the fuck Yuri is!"

An ominous muttering arose from the crowd, but Beria remained unruffled. "People have been trying to talk to you all evening," he said. "Trying to help you make sense of things. But you're not a good listener, are you? Very well." He patted Chemayev on the cheek, an avuncular gesture that caused Chemayev, as if in reflex, to release him. "Let's say for the sake of argument I'm not who I appear to be. That I'm merely the likeness of Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria. Not God's creation, but Yuri's. Given Yuri's playful nature, this is a distinct possibility. But how far, I wonder, does playfulness extend? Does he only create doubles of the famous, the notorious? Or might he also create doubles of individuals who're of no interest to anyone...except, perhaps, to Viktor Chemayev?" A meager smile touched his lips. "That doesn't seem reasonable, does it?"

There was a rustling behind Chemayev, as of many people shifting about, and he turned toward the sound. An avenue had been created in the ranks of human wreckage from the *krushova* and sauntering toward him along it — the way he used to walk when he spotted you at a bar or on a street corner, and had it in mind to play a trick, his head tipped to the side, carrying his left hand by his waist, as if about to break into a dance step — was a blond, slender, blue-eyed man in a fawn leather jacket, gray silk shirt, and cream-colored slacks. His boyish smile was parenthetically displayed between two delicately incised lines that helped lend him a look of perpetual slyness. In fact, all the details of his features were so finely drawn they might have been created by a horde of artisan spiders armed with tiny lapidary instruments. It was the face of a sensitive, mischievous child come to a no less sensitive and mischievous maturity. He looked not a day older than he had on the last morning of his life three and a half years before.

"That's right!" Nicolai said, holding out his arms to Viktor. "In the flesh! Surprised?" He wheeled in a circle as if showing off a new suit. "Still the handsome twenty-two-year-old, eh? Still a fucking cloud in trousers."

Logic was no remedy for this apparition. If the floor had opened beneath him to reveal a lake of fire, Chemayev would not have been more frightened. He retreated in a panic, fumbling for the pistol.

"Man! Don't be an asshole! I'm not going to give you any trouble." Nicolai showed Chemayev his empty palms. "We've been down this road once. You don't want to do it again."

Guilt and remorse took up prominent posts along Chemayev's mental perimeters. His breath came shallowly, and he had difficulty speaking. "Nicolai?" he said. "It...it's not you...?"

"Sure it is. Want me to prove it? No problem." Nicolai folded his arms on his chest and appeared to be thinking; then he grinned. "What's that night club where all the whores dress like Nazis? Fuck! I'm no good with names. But you must remember the night we got drunk there? We screwed everything in sight. Remember?"

Chemayev nodded, though he barely registered the words.

"On the way home we had an argument," Nicolai said. "It was the only time we ever got into a fight. You pulled the car off onto the side of the Garden Ring and we beat the shit out of each other. Remember what we argued about?"

"Yes." Chemayev was beginning to believe that the man might actually be Nicolai. The thought gave him no comfort.

"We argued about whether the goddamn Rolling Stones were better with Brian Jones or Mick Taylor." Nicolai fingered a pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket, tapped one out. "Stupid bullshit. I couldn't chew for a fucking week." He fired up his cigarette and exhaled a fan of smoke; he closed his right eye, squinted at Chemayev as if assessing the impact of his words. "Want more proof? No problem."

He dropped, loose-limbed, into a nearby chair and began to reel off another anecdote, but no further proofs were necessary. His unstrung collapse; his languid gestures; the way he manipulated the cigarette in his left hand, passing it from one pair of fingers to another like a magician practicing a coin trick — the entire catalogue of his body language and speech were unmistakably Nicolai's. No actor alive, however skillful, could have achieved such verisimilitude.

As Chemayev looked on, half-listening to Nicolai, a consoling inner voice, a voice of fundamental soundness and fine proletarian sensibilities

that had been there all the time but only became audible when essential to mental stability, was offering assurances that beyond the boundaries of his temporary derangement the world was as ever, humdrum and explicable, and no such thing as this could be happening — drugs, alcohol, and stress were to blame — rambling on and on with increasingly insane calmness and irrelevance, like the whispered litany of a self-help guru suggesting seven simple methods for maximizing spiritual potential issuing from a cassette playing over a pair of headphones fallen from the head of gunshot victim who was bleeding out onto a kitchen floor. Yet simultaneously, in some cramped sub-basement of his brain, urgent bulletins concerning zombie sightings and karmic retribution were being received, warnings that came too late to save the iniquitous murderer of a childhood friend....

"Viktor!" Nicolai was staring at him with concern. "Are you all right? Sit down, man. I know this is fucked up, but we've got some things to talk about."

Unable to think of an acceptable alternative, Chemayev sagged into the chair opposite, but he did not lean back and he rested the pistol on his knee. Overwhelmed with guilt and regret, he had the urge to apologize, to beg forgiveness, but recognized the inadequacy of such gestures. His heart seemed to constrict into a dark nugget of self-loathing.

"You know it's me now, right?" Nicolai asked, "You don't have any doubts?"

Called upon to speak, Chemayev was unable to repress his urge for apology and emitted a sobbing, incoherent string of phrases that, reduced to their essence, translated into an admission of responsibility and a denial of the same on the grounds that he'd had no choice, if he hadn't followed Polutin's orders, Polutin would have killed him, his family.... The shame of the act never left him, but what else could he have done?

Nicolai shifted lower in his chair, reached down to the floor and stubbed out his cigarette. He watched the embers fade. "I never expected to last long in Moscow," he said gloomily. "That's one of the differences between us. You always thought you were going to win the game. Me, I knew it was only a matter of time before I lost." He tapped out another cigarette. "I can't help how you feel. And believe me, I know. I saw your face when you pulled the trigger. I see your face now. You're not hard to

read." He lit up again. "You'll never forgive yourself, no matter what I tell you. So why don't we put the subject aside for now. We've more important things to discuss."

Once again Chemayev could think of nothing to say other than to abase himself, to offer further apology. Tears streamed from his eyes, and though the tears were validation of a kind, evidence that his spirit, albeit tarnished, was still capable of normal reactions, they also infused him with shame. He struggled to control himself. "I don't understand," he said. "How is this possible? How can you be here?"

"With Yuri all things are possible," said Nicolai; then his glum mood lifted. "You know those American jokes? The ones with the punch lines that go, 'I've got good news, and I've got bad news'? It's like that. I've got good news, and I've got bad news. Which do you want first?"

This was the old Nicolai, always joking, trying to make light of things. Chemayev relaxed by a degree from his rigid posture.

"Come on!" Nicolai said. "Which do you want?"

"Good."

"Okay. The good news is there is an afterlife. The bad news" — Nicolai made a sweeping gesture that, for all Chemayev knew, might have been intended to include the apartment, Russia, the universe — "this is it!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"This place." Nicolai gave a sardonic laugh. "This fucking night club. Eternity."

There must be, Chemayev thought, more to the joke.

"You still don't get it, huh? Christ!" Nicolai leaned forward and gave Chemayev a rap on the knee, like a teacher scolding — fondly — a favorite pupil. "For such a genius you're not too quick on the uptake."

"Eternity?" said Chemayev, incredulous, "Yuri Lebedev's Eternity...that's the afterlife? You're not serious?"

"Serious? What the fuck's that? Is Moscow serious? Starving people camped in the subways. Generals selling tanks on the black market. That old fart in the Kremlin swilling down a quart a day and promising us the capitalist paradise. It's no less serious than that." Nicolai wriggled in his chair like a kid with an itch. "Yuri, man...he's...." He gave his head a shake, as if to signify awe. "You don't have to hang around the party long before you learn things about him."

"You mean that horseshit about he's a fucking wizard? A Master of the Mystic East?"

"They're things a guy like you might not be able to swallow. But for a guy like me, with what I've been through, I don't have any choice."

Chemayev looked down at his hands.

"Have you ever met anyone who knew Yuri?" Nicolai asked. "Any of his friends, his associates. Not just someone who used to work for him."

After giving this due consideration Chemayev said he had not.

"That's because they're dead. Grenkov, Zereva, Ashkenazy. All those guys. They're all dead and they're all at the party. Man, you wouldn't believe who's here! It's the goddamn Communist Hall of Fame. Yuri's a big fan of those power-mad old bastards. Lots of generals and shit. Not many poets, though. Yuri was never much of a reader."

"Oh. So it's the *party* that's the afterlife!" Chemayev gave a scornful laugh. "This is bullshit!"

Nicolai's face hardened. "Bullshit? Well, maybe you'll think this is bullshit too! When you shot me, I went out. One second I was staring at you. At your dumbass face! It looked like you were going to start whimpering. I had time to say to myself, 'Oh, fuck...yeah...of course....' I figured things out, you understand. The way you were pouting — I knew it meant you'd scrambled over whatever pissy little moral hurdle the job had posed. And then" — he snapped his fingers — "I wasn't there anymore." He allowed Chemayev time to react and when no reaction was forthcoming he went on: "I don't remember much afterward. But at some point I began to hear a voice. I can't tell you what kind of voice. It was all around me...this enormous sound. As if I was inside the mouth that was speaking. Sometimes it seems I can almost repeat the words it was saying — they're on the tip of my tongue. But I can't spit them out." He made a frustrated noise. "The next thing I remember for certain, I'm walking down a dingy corridor toward a door. Toward the party. I'm wearing nice clothes. Cologne. It's like I just got out of the shower and I'm ready for a night on the town."

Nicolai took a hit of his cigarette and let smoke leak out between his lips, as if too enervated to exhale properly. "I suppose it does sound like bullshit. I can't explain it. Everybody says that while Yuri was building the club he was hanging out with some strange people. Experts on the

Kabbala. Computer scientists. He even brought in a shaman from up near Archangel. They say he went through some drastic changes, and I believe it. Whatever he was like before, I'll bet it wasn't much like he is now."

"You've met him?"

Nicolai coughed, grimaced, butted his cigarette. "You don't meet Yuri. You experience him."

"You experience him." Chemayev gave a sarcastic laugh. "So you're saying he's like a sunset or something."

"A sunset...." Nicolai looked as if he was mulling it over. "It's not a totally inappropriate analogy. But for sure he's not a guy you sit down and have a chat with. The fact is, I don't think he's a guy at all. Not anymore. The things he got into when he was building the club, it transformed him. The club, Yuri, the party...they're all the same somehow." Nicolai smiled crookedly. "That's pretty weak, isn't it? Maybe the best I can do is tell you what it's like being here all the time." He gestured at one of the walls. "Take a look around."

Chemayev had not paid much attention to the room when he had entered, but he was fairly certain the walls had not been covered, as they were now, with a faded earth-toned mural like those found on the walls of factories during the Communist era: determined-looking, square-jawed men and broad-shouldered women with motherly bosoms engaged in the noble state-approved pursuit of dump-truck-assembly, faces aglow with the joy of communal effort, their sinewy arms seemingly imbued with the same iron strength as the mighty girders and grimly functional machinery that framed them. Other than their two chairs, the room was empty of furniture. The *krushova* dwellers and Beria were gone, and the noise of the party had abated, replaced by a faint roaring, like the sound of blood heard when you put a seashell close to your ear. Chemayev thought he had become inured to apparitions, but a chill spiked in his chest.

"Shit changes all the time," said Nicolai. "Empty rooms fill up with people. You'll be having a talk with someone and it'll just end — like the rest of the scene was cut out of the movie. Snip! You're in another room, doing something else. You'll be sleeping in a bed, the next second you're dancing with somebody. There's no logic to it, it's all done on a whim. Yuri's whim. The physical laws of the place are his laws. Not God's, not nature's. It's like everyone here is inside him. Part of him. He's become a

universe unto himself. One that contains the club and the party.... For all I know he's taken over the fucking world. But the difference between the places I'm familiar with — the club and the party — most people in the club are still alive." He started to take out another cigarette, then thought better of it. "We get visitors like you from the real world now and again. And various among us are privileged to visit the club. But...." His mood veered toward exasperation, and Chemayev wondered, with only a touch of cynicism, if Yuri might not be editing his emotions as well as his scenes. "Don't you understand?" Nicolai asked. "Yuri's in control of everything that happens here. We're fucking figments of his imagination. Once you step inside Eternity you're subject to his whims the same as us. I don't know what kind of deal you're hoping to do with him, but take my word, it's not going to be what you expected. You should get the hell out. Right now." He chuckled. "Here I am trying to save your ass. Old habits. Of course" — he kept his face neutral — "I'm probably too late."

"If what you say is true," Chemayev said, "then logic would dictate that you're the subject of Yuri's whim at present. That's the reason for this...this confrontation. You must have something to tell me. The lecture on Yuri's power, I assume."

Nicolai jumped up and went to stand facing one of the muralled walls, as if compelled by the heroic figure of a muscular redheaded man holding up an ingot in a pair of tongs, staring at it with such unalloyed devotion, it might have been the sacred light of Mother Russia soon to become an axle joint. "That's what I've been waiting to hear," he said. "The voice of the heartless motherfucker who shot me. I knew it was in you somewhere." He wheeled about, his clever features cinched in fury. "You think this is a confrontation? My dear friend Viktor! My cherished boyhood companion! Don't you worry. You'll be back here one day...and maybe not just for a visit. Then we'll have a fucking confrontation!" He paced toward Chemayev and stood with his feet apart as if preparing to attack. "I do have something to tell you, but it's got nothing to do with what I said about Yuri. That was for old time's sake. For a while it was like we were friends again, you know. A couple of guys sitting around bullshitting. I can't figure why it happened, but that's how it felt."

Chemayev could relate to Nicolai's confusion. His own feelings, compounded of love, fear, guilt, and much more, were too complex to

analyze, like a stew that had been simmering for three and a half years, new ingredients constantly being added, fragrant, rich, and savory, but ultimately indigestible. Nothing could be salvaged here, he realized. "What do you have to tell me?"

Nicolai plucked out his Marlboros, tapped the pack on the back of his hand. "Russian women. Ever think about how tough they are, Viktor? They get the crap beat out of them, they take the best abuse of drunks and addicts. Their fathers fuck them, their boyfriends pimp them. By the time they're sixteen they're world-class ballbusters. They're still sweet, still capable of love. But they've learned to do what's necessary. Most men don't see this. They don't understand that no matter what the woman feels for them, she's going to do what's in her own best interests. She's become just like a Russian man. Sentimental on the outside. Soft. But on the inside they're steel."

"Is this leading somewhere?" asked Chemayev.

"I fucked your woman tonight," Nicolai said. "Your beautiful Larissa. I did her twice. The second time I had her up the ass. She loved it, she went absolutely crazy. I've never considered myself a petty sort, but I must admit it gave me a great deal of satisfaction." He studied the pack of cigarettes, as if using it to focus his thoughts. "You know how it is with some women — when you make love to them their faces get twisted, distorted. Sex strips away their beauty, revealing the beast. But Larissa, man.... She's amazing. No matter how depraved the act, how degrading your intent, she just gets more beautiful. She had this entranced look. Radiant. Like a saint. Like the more I defiled her, the closer she grew to God." His soft laugh expressed a touch of incredulity. "But none of that's important, is it? She's a whore, after all. So she fucks a guy — even a dead guy — what's the big deal? She's doing her job. If she enjoys it a little, all that means is she's a professional." He came closer and perched on the arm of his chair. "After the first fuck we talked a while. She told me this was her last night, she was going away with the man she loved. She told me all about you. What a great guy you were. How much you loved her. All your virtues. I didn't try to illuminate her. I didn't have to. She realizes you're a calculating son-of-a-bitch at heart. She didn't say it, but it was implicit in what she said. She knows you. She loves you. How could she not? She's exactly the same as you. She'll do whatever she has to and there won't be

a stain on her conscience." He repocketed the Marlboros without removing one. He stood, adjusted the hang of his jacket. "Okay. That's it. My duty's done."

He seemed to be waiting for a response.

In standing Chemayev was unsteady as an old man, he had to put a hand out to balance himself. He should be angry, he thought, but he only felt out of his depth. There was a gap between himself and his emotions too wide for any spark to cross. But because he believed he should react in some way, because not to react smacked of inadequacy, he pointed the pistol at Nicolai's chest.

"Give it a try," said Nicolai, he held both arms straight out from his sides, turning himself into a blond, expensively tailored Jesus on the Cross. "It worked the first time. I'm interested in what'll happen myself." He rested his head on his shoulder. "Wonder what Yuri will have to say?"

After pondering his options Chemayev decided it would be best to hurry past this part of things. "Where's Yuri now?"

As if in response the air between them began to ripple, a sluggish disturbance that spread throughout the room, infecting floor and ceiling and walls, and as it spread the dimensions of the room underwent a slow, undulant elongation, an evolution that seemed organic, like the stretching of a python's gullet when it prepares to swallow an exceptionally large object. Once the rippling ceased Chemayev found that he was standing at a remove of some forty feet from Nicolai.

"Haven't you heard a thing I've been telling you?" Nicolai's voice carried a slight echo. "In this place you can't get away from Yuri."

Before Chemayev could react, the rippling started up once again, accompanied by a dimming of the lights. Moved by an old reflex of mutual reliance he sprinted toward Nicolai, but the process of elongation was on this occasion so rapid, like the reduction in view achieved by narrowing the aperture of a telescopic lens, by the time he had gone only a couple of steps, Nicolai had dwindled to a tiny black figure at the far end of a long corridor. A foul-smelling corridor with stained, pitted concrete walls, littered with trash, ranged by warped wooden doors and buckets of sand. Hills of cans and bottles, stratified canyons of paper and plastic waste, dried-up riverbeds of urine and spilled vodka, altogether effecting a post-apocalyptic terrain laid out beneath a dirty white sky in which hung a

jaundiced light bulb sun. It was the same corridor he and Nataliya had walked down earlier that evening.

The elevator door, battered, defaced by graffiti, stood about twenty feet away. Chemayev had the impulse to run to it, to seek shelter in the relative sanity of the night club. But he was fed up with being given the runaround; he'd entered into a straightforward business arrangement and he intended to see it through to a contract, no matter what games Yuri wanted to play. As for Larissa, if she'd lied...he could handle it. Their problems were every one associated with this psychotic country populated entirely by lunatics and their victims. By tomorrow night they'd be clear of all that.

He turned back, intending to frame a few last words that would convey to Nicolai both a more rational, more dignified portion of apology, and his acknowledgment of how things stood between them; but his former friend was nowhere to be seen. Looking at Chemayev from an arm's-length away was the swarthy old derelict who had been sweeping up the corridor. He had barely noticed him on first meeting, but now he marveled at the man's ugliness. With his stubby arms and legs, his swollen belly and narrow sloping shoulders, his smallish head, he might have been a toad that had undergone a transformation, only partially successful, into the human. He had about him a bitter reek reminiscent of the smell of the vegetation in the garden. The chest of his grimy T-shirt was mapped by a large, vaguely rectangular brown stain like the image of a spectacularly undistinguished continent whose most prominent features were bits of dried food stuck to the fabric along the south coast and central plain. His wool trousers were shapeless as those of a clown, supported by frayed suspenders. Filthy twists of gray hair hung from his mottled scalp, half-curtaining his eyes, and his face, sagging, pouchy, cheeks and nose sporting graffiti of broken capillaries, thick-lipped and dull.... It reminded Chemayev of dilapidated hovels in the villages of his childhood, habitations humbled by weather and hard times into something lumpish, barely distinguishable from a mound of earth, a played-out vegetable plot in the back, rusted garden tools leaning against bowed steps, its thatched roof molting, sided with unpainted boards worn to a shit brown, and something ancient, howlingly mad with age and failure, peering out through two dark windows with cracked panes. It was fascinating in its lack of

human vitality. More than fascinating. Compelling. It seemed to hold Chemayev's eyes, to exert a pull that intensified with every passing second, as if the mad absence within had the virtue of a collapsed star, a generating fire grown so cold and inert it had become fire's opposite, a negative engine wherein chaos became comprehensible and physical laws were reworked according to some implausible design. He could not look away from it, and when at last he did, not due to his own efforts, but because the old man moved, extending a hand to him, palm upward like a beggar, thus shattering the connection, he felt lightheaded and confused and frail, as if he had been winnowing away, unraveling in the depths of that bleak stare.

In his frail lightheaded confusion there were a few things Chemayev thought he understood. This liver-spotted troll, this mud man with a black hole inside him, was Yuri — he was fairly certain of that. He was also fairly certain that the old bastard had his hand out for money. For the gold certificates contained inside his, Chemayev's, money belt. What was he supposed to do? Just fork it all over? Fuck that! Where were the papers to sign? What guarantees did he have — *could* he have — with a creature like this. He wanted to establish some sort of security for himself and Larissa, but couldn't summon the words, and he realized with complete surety that fear had nothing to do with his inability to speak, words simply weren't part of Yuri's program — no more talk was needed, everything had been said, and now it was Chemayev's choice to give over the money and see what that bought him...or to exercise caution for the time being.

That he accepted this proscription, that he believed Yuri had so much control over the situation, implied that he accepted Nicolai's assessment of the man. He would have liked to deny this, but it seemed undeniable. He should tell someone, he thought. Before leaving Moscow he should tip the media, get a TV truck out to Eternity, expose the fact that the great Yuri Lebedev was running more than a night club, the old geezer had become a minor fucking deity in charge of a franchise in the afterlife catering to murderers, hookers, and various relics of the Cold War.... This trickle of whimsy, edged with more than a little hysteria, dried up when Chemayev noticed that the walls and ceiling and floor of the corridor around and behind Yuri were billowing in and out with same rhythm as the rise and fall of his chest, as if the old man were the central image of a

painting, a portrait of squalor floating on the surface of some gelatinous substance in a state of mild perturbation. He backed farther away, but the distance between himself and Yuri did not lengthen, and he saw that his body, too, was billowing, rippling, ruled by the tidal flux of Yuri's sluggish breath — it appeared they were both elements of the same semi-liquid medium. Horrified, he flailed and kicked, trying to swim away, but none of his exertions had the least effect...unless they played a role in the steady expansion of Yuri's face. It was widening, distending, losing its cohesion like a shape made of colored oil, spreading to cover more and more of the fluid atop which it was suspended, resembling a face distorted by a funhouse mirror, and Chemayev felt that his own body was suffering a similar distortion, his legs elongating, his torso becoming bulbous, his head lopsided and pumpkin-sized, and that he and Yuri were flowing together.

Yuri's mouth stretched wider and wider, becoming a dark, gaping concavity that reduced his other features to tiny irrelevancies, like the glowing lures above the enormous mouth of an angler fish. It was curving to surround Chemayev, preparing less to swallow him than to incorporate him into its emptiness, and he thought briefly of the garden, the dark oval through which he had passed to reach it. If he could have screamed he would have made a cry that reached to heaven, but he was as voiceless as a strand of seaweed floating on an off-shore billow, going out on the tide toward the great hollow places of the sea, and as he passed into the darkness, Yuri's darkness, as it closed over him, his fear — like his voice — was subsumed by the myriad impressions that came to him from the place into which he was being absorbed.

He had a sense of the man Yuri had been, a quick mental rumor that left flavors of crudity, brutality, lustfulness, intelligence...an intellect that had aspired too high, that had sought a godlike invulnerability and created the means necessary to achieve it, but had lost everything of consequence in gaining it, for Yuri's character was merely a component of the thing, the place, he had become. Through a mingling of magic and science and will he had triggered a sort of spiritual fission, all the particulars of his flesh and mind exploding into an immense, radiant cloud that did not dissipate in the way of a mushroom cloud, but maintained its integrity at the moment of peak fury, sustained by a surface tension that

might have been the residue of the spell he had caused to be pronounced. Not a god so much as an embryonic entity of unguessable nature, striving to reach its maturity, extending its influence through various human (and perhaps inhuman — who could say?) agencies, populating its vacancy with dead souls, partly just for company, to ease its aching emptiness, but also utilizing their knowledge to engineer plots designed to increase its power, always feeding, growing, becoming.... This was among the last thoughts Chemayev recalled before he was utterly subsumed, drowned in Yuri's black essence — that all Yuri's energies were being desperately directed toward the process of growth, of fulfilling whatever evolutionary destiny was now his — though perhaps he had no real destiny. That had come to be Yuri's torment, the one feeling of which he was capable: the fear that he had trapped himself inside the prison of his own power, that he could only grow larger, that no matter how much power he gained, the dissolution and chaos of his new condition would never change, and he could impose no order, no equilibrium that would satisfy his original wish to be both man and god, he could merely unify his environment — whether this consisted of a night club, Moscow, Russia, or entire planet — under the disordered banner of Eternity. His circumstance posed an intriguing intellectual and philosophical puzzle. Through his machinations, his alliances with generals and politicians and the *mafiyas*, might not Yuri be responsible for the chaos overwhelming the old Soviet states, or were the two forces feeding into one another? And if Yuri came to dominate the world or a substantial portion thereof, if he could avoid being absorbed by a creature like himself, but vaster and more cruel, would anyone notice? Was not the current chaos of the world all-pervasive, were not genocides and serial killings and natural disasters and the unending disregard of one soul for another sufficient evidence of this? And that being so, could it be possible that this chaos had always been the product of sad invisible monsters such as Yuri, a ruling class gone unnoticed by everyone except for saints and madmen...? Chemayev was amused by the formulation of these questions. He thought if he could sustain his awareness a while longer he might learn the answers, and they in turn would lead to subtler questions, the ones Yuri himself had asked, and if he could learn *those* answers, benefiting from Yuri's experience, he might be able to avoid Yuri's mistakes. But at the moment it didn't seem

worth the effort. Blind now, all his senses occluded, uncertain of his location, even as to which plane of existence he occupied, by all rights he should have been more afraid; but having practiced death once before, and having since witnessed a condition worse than death, he felt prepared for anything.



ON REGAINING consciousness Chemayev realized he was back in the garden. Considering the cautionary flavor of his previous experience and the circular pattern governing the evening, he had little doubt that March would soon put in an appearance, but nevertheless he found the bitter smell of Yuri's vegetation and the sound of water spurting from the broken fountain and the silver bar of light floating overhead solid and comforting by contrast to the emptiness through which he had passed. Surprised to find that he was still holding the nine-millimeter pistol, he tucked it into his waist and headed for the fountain, pushing aside black branches clustered with white leaves bearing scatters of inky characters — he wondered now if these might not be fragments of the formula that had made Yuri's transformation possible.

Once he reached the edge of the cobblestone circle he stationed himself behind some bushes, a position from which he had a clear view of the fountain. The abstracted calm that had eased his passage from the corridor to the garden remained strong in him, and waiting went easily at first. With its black serene sky, the silver bar in place of a sun, the ruined fountain and eccentric forest, the place had a Mexican *Twilight Zone* ambience — like an old B-movie set awaiting its *Dramatis Personae* — that appealed to him. But as the minutes wore on his anxiety resurfaced. He chastised himself for not having given Yuri the money. The moment had been brief, the circumstances problematic. But everything he'd worked for had been on the line. He should have been up to it. Of course paying the money might have been a fruitless gesture. God only knew what was going on. It was apparent that he was being manipulated. Equally apparent that Polutin had a hand in things — hadn't he implied that he'd done business with Yuri? Perhaps he'd managed to sour the deal Chemayev had negotiated. One way or another, he'd just have to find another way to get the money to Yuri.

He became so enmeshed in worry he nearly failed to notice March on the opposite side of the circle, half-hidden in the bushes. Not shirtless as before. Wearing his leather trenchcoat. Chemayev aimed his pistol at him, but let the barrel drop. Killing him seemed the safest course, but he had no clue what the repercussions might be. It might be wise to feel things out. Risky, perhaps. But the pistol boosted his confidence. He tucked it back into the waist of his trousers, concealing it beneath his jacket, and stepped out onto the cobblestones.

"March!" he called.

March's head snapped toward him. "Viktor! Christ, what're you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? Just taking a stroll. What are you doing here?" As he spoke Chemayev recognized that their dialogue was roughly the mirror image of what they had said to one another on his previous adventure in the garden. He didn't know whether to take this for a good or a bad omen.

"I'm not sure how to answer that." March edged forward. "Frankly, I've been having myself one hell of a time. A fucking asylum would feel like a rest home after this place."

It hadn't occurred to Chemayev that anyone else might have been having experiences similar to his own; but judging by March's behavior he thought now this might be the case. The Irishman kept casting furtive looks to the side, as if expecting some menace to emerge from the bushes.

"This Yuri character..." March's right hand fluttered up; he rubbed the back of his head fitfully. "Did you keep your appointment with him?"

"Not yet," said Chemayev.

"If I were you I might give it a pass."

"You've seen him, then?"

March shook his head in the affirmative, then said, "I don't know. Maybe." He moved another step toward Chemayev. "I was talking to this old geezer. The guy looked like he'd spent the night in the boneyard kissing corpses. Filthy bugger! About seventy years old going on terminal. He claimed to be Yuri."

"You talked with him?"

"Naw, we stared into one another's eyes! Of course we talked."

"What did you talk about?"

An angry tightness in his voice, March said, "Oh, this and that. The rugby final, the roots of British oppression. Chatty bits." He had another quick glance behind him. "Do you know of a way out of here?"

March's agitation lifted Chemayev's spirits. "How about the way you came in?"

"Are you fucking with me, Viktor?" March walked purposefully toward him, stopping close to the fountain, about twenty feet away. "I need an ally. If you're not an ally, I may have to take a bite out of you." He had regained some of his self-assurance, as if the show of menace had been restorative. "I've had a number of unsettling experiences. A premonition of violence as well. Perhaps it's all in my head. I'm not a tall sure someone didn't put something in my drink. But no matter that, I'm sensing a hostile vibe between us. Why would that be?"

Chemayev considered showing March the pistol, but decided against it. Confrontation had not served him well the last time. "Work it out for yourself. I've got my own problems." He started to walk away, but March said, "Hang on, Viktor." He was holding a chrome-plated automatic with a taped grip.

Chemayev gawked at it. "Where did you get the gun?"

"Picked it up during my travels. I was feeling a touch inadequate after checking my own weapon. But now" — he hefted the gun, as if appreciating its weight — "now I'm feeling twice the man I ever was."

He urged Chemayev toward the fountain, had him sit on carved fragments at its base. Chemayev arranged himself carefully, adjusting his left hip so the pistol came loose in his waistband. In his thoughts he remarked again on the role reversal taking place. During their previous encounter he had been the anxious one, the one to ask about Yuri, the one to decide for confrontation. Perhaps all this pointed to a happier conclusion. But did March suspect what he suspected? He'd mentioned a premonition of violence. Chemayev was forced to assume that this premonition had involved the two of them.

"Do you fancy Irish music, Viktor?" March asked out of the blue; he sat down cross-legged about fifteen feet away. "Bands, you know. Rock 'n' roll."

"U-2," said Chemayev absently. "I like U-2."

"Jesus! U-2!" March launched into a simpering parody of "In The

Name of Love," and then made a flatulent sound with his lips. "Bono Vox, my ass! That ball-less little prat! I'm talking about real Irish music. Like Van Morrison. Van the Man! Not some gobshite got up in a gold jockstrap."

"He's okay," Chemayev said.

"What the fuck do you mean, 'okay'? That's soul music, man! Ahh!" He made a dismissive gesture with the automatic. "That's what I get for trying to talk rock 'n'roll with a Russian. Your idea of music is some fat asshole playing folk songs on the lute."

Chemayev leaned back against the base of the fountain. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the arc of water spurting from the broken pipe; overhead, a great crossbeam broadcast a benign silvery radiance. Black trees with leafy prayer flags stretched toward the light, and the round gray stones beneath him seemed to be eddying in their concentric circles. He allowed the fingers of his right hand to brush the pistol grip beneath his jacket. His chances were fifty-fifty, he figured. About the same as ever.

"You look almost happy," March said. "Did you have the good thought?"

"Happy's not the word for it," said Chemayev.

"What am I missing, Viktor? You seem so at ease. It's not like you. Do you know something I should know, or is it the drugs have just kicked in?"

"I don't know shit," said Chemayev. "I've been having a bad night, too. Someone's been playing games with me."

"Games," said March. "Yeah, that's my feeling." He cracked the knuckles of his free hand by making a fist. "Do you recall me mentioning the dealings I had with your Mister Polutin over in London? A terrible business. Couple of his boys got taken out. Well, not long after I was passing the evening with this Rastafarian bunch in a squat in Chelsea. I won't go into the whys and wherefores — suffice it to say, it was part of a complex proceeding. At any rate, I was feeling comfortable with things when I made the mistake of smoking a joint one of those savages handed me. I'm not sure what was in it, but from the extreme paranoia that resulted, I'm guessing it was angel dust. The idea was, I gather, to fuck me up sufficient so the Rastas could carve me. I had the suspicion it was Polutin's idea...though considering the relationship we've had since, I may be mistaken. But the drug, whatever it was, didn't have the desired

effect." The barrel of the automatic drooped toward his knee. "Not that I wasn't sick as a fish. Fucking hell! I was feverish. My thoughts buzzing like flies. Patches of color swimming around me. My bones ached. I thought my heart was going to burst out its bottom like a soggy sack full of red milk. But the paranoia...it organized me somehow. I became a calm at the center of the storm of my symptoms. I could see everything in the room with wonderful clarity.

"There was eight of 'em. All licorice-skinned and snake-headed. Eyes a gleam. Lounging in the doorways, sitting on sprung sofas. Trying to orchestrate my paranoia with their whispered talk. Streetlight washed through the busted-out windows, painting a shine on their faces and exposing the shit spray-painted on the walls. Designs, mostly. A variety of strange devices that had to do with that mongrel religion of theirs, but which spoke to me in a way unintended by the artist. I could read the future in those mazes of squiggly lines."

A slackness came into March's face, as if he'd been brought hard against the memory of a transcendent moment. Chemayev inched his hand beneath the flap of his jacket, touched the pistol grip with his fingertips.

"Have you ever been close to death, Viktor?" asked March. "I don't mean nearly dead. I'm talking about the way you're close to a woman when you're lying with her in the act of love and there's not an inch of air between you that isn't humming with sweet vibration. That's how it was that night. I was in death's arms, fucking her slow and easy, and she was fusing her power with mine. I could actually see the bitch. She had a sleek silver face with a catlike Asian cast. The mask of a demoness. The silver moved as supplely as flesh to make her wicked smiles. Her hair was white, long and fine, and her breasts were corpse-pale, the nipples purplish. Like poison berries. When she opened her mouth I saw a silver word embossed on her black tongue. A character in the language I spoke before I was born, telling me it was time to act. That if I took action at that precise second, I'd come through the ordeal."

In his distraction March's pale face had an aspect of long-preserved youth, like that of a revived mummy; the licks of black hair falling over his brow looked like absences in his flesh.

"When I drew my gun," he went on, "I was inside death. Hot and slick

with her. Her legs locked about my waist, fingernails stabbing my back. Both of us screaming with release. I had six bullets, and every one went true. Six head shots. Their dreadlocks hissed and snapped, their eyes rolled up like horses' eyes. One of the survivors came at me with a machete, and I killed him with my hands. The last one fled." He ran the barrel of the automatic idly along his thigh. "That was strange enough, but what happened next was stranger yet. I was standing there, reviewing my work. Stoned as a fucking goose, I was. Reading the bloody sentences newly written on the walls. Obituaries of the recently deceased. Tributes to my marksmanship. When I turned my head, following the red script of those shattered lives, I found death was still with me. I'd assumed she was an ordinary hallucination, that she'd served her purpose and moved on. But there she stood, posed like Hell's calendar girl with hands on hips and one leg cocked, smiling at me. I'd only seen her close up before. Only been witness to half her beauty. The silvery stuff of her face flowed in sinuous curves to embellish her arms and legs. Silver flourishes coiled down her hips and framed her secret hair, which was trimmed to the shape of seven snakes standing on their tails. She beckoned to me, and I couldn't resist. I lay with her once again."

Chemayev had succeeded in securing a firm grasp on the pistol; but recalling March's quickness, he didn't trust the steadiness of his hand.

"It was a fool's act," March said, "to be coupling with what half my mind believed to be a product of madness. Especially with the dead lying around us, souls still tangled in their flesh. But I was in thrall. Her musk coated my tongue, her sweat formed a silvery sheen on my skin. My eyes went black with staring through the slits of her eyes into the thoughtless place beyond. She whispered to me. Not words of love, but a sibilant breath that entered through my ear and slithered into all my hollows, making an icy shape inside me. She stayed with me until the sky paled and flies began to gather like early fishermen at the edges of the spills of blood. But she never truly left me. I've seen her time and again since that night. Whenever trouble's near she comes to guide my arm." He gave Chemayev a sideways look. "I've seen her tonight."

"Maybe you're mistaken. It could have been one of Yuri's girls. They like to dress up." Chemayev thought if it weren't for the splash of water behind him, he would be able to hear the beating of his heart.

"I've seen her tonight," March repeated. "But I'm not so sure she's with me this time." He paused. "What do you think of my story, Viktor?"

"You mean apart from the obvious pathology?"

"Always ready to spit in the devil's eye." March lowered his head and chuckled. "You remind me of myself as a lad."

Chemayev's hand tightened on the pistol, but he failed to seize the opportunity.

"You probably think I'm having you on," said March, and was about to say more, when Chemayev, his patience for this game exhausted, broke in: "I don't know what you've got in mind, but I doubt you understand the implications of your story."

"And I suppose you're bursting to enlighten me?"

"Sure. Why not?" said Chemayev. "The idea that a man who's accustomed to violence, who thrives on it, has come to rely on a fictive alliance with death...with a comic book image of death..."

"All alliances are fictive," said March. "Haven't you figured that one out?"

Chemayev ignored the interruption. "The fact you've created an imaginary playmate to help enable your violence — even if just in a story — that implies slippage. Weakness."

March's face emptied. "Weakness is it?"

"What else? Maybe it's a touch of guilt. Some old flutter of religion. Something that demands you create a quasi-mystical justification for actions you previously considered utilitarian."

"Quasi-mystical." March blew air through his lips like a horse. "That cuts deep, Viktor. It's a brand I'm not sure I can bear. Especially coming from a featherless little chirper like yourself."

It seemed to Chemayev that March was fast approaching a moment of decision, a moment when he'd be preoccupied, all his attention focused on the possible consequences arising from the exercise of his anger, and as a result, for a fraction of a second he'd be slow to react.

"It may be a product of age," Chemayev said. "Your increasing awareness of mortality."

"Let it rest," said March. "Seriously."

"The brain could be in the early stages of decomposition. Logic decaying into fantasy, gasses collecting in the skull."

"Do you hear what I'm telling you, boy?"

"It must look like a fucking swamp in there." Chemayev tapped the side of his head. "Methane seeping from rotten stumps, gray scraps of tissue hanging down like moss. The brain a huge pale cheese wreathed in mist, rising from the black water. The creatures of your imagination peeping from its fissures. Most of them bullshit versions of yourself."

"You bloody little piss merchant! Shut the fuck up!"

"Bruce Lee March, Dylan Thomas March, Charlie Manson March. Niall the Catholic Fishboy, old Father McConnell's favorite sweet. And let's not forget your masterpiece: Death. Based, I imagine, on some pimply little squinch who wouldn't let you have a bite of her muffin back in trade school. When the mists get really thick, they all pick up banjos and sing 'Toora Loora Loora.'"

"That's enough!" said March.

"You know, there's every chance you've developed a tumor. Brain cancer's known to cause delusions. Or maybe it's early Alzheimer's. You might want to get yourself checked out."

March's nearly colorless eyes appeared to lighten further, as if the black shadow of his soul had shrunk to a more compact shape, pulling back from his skin, and Chemayev, feeling certain the moment had arrived, slid the pistol from beneath his jacket and shot him twice in the chest.

The bullets twisted March, flipped him fishlike onto his side; the detonations blended with and seemed to enlarge his outcry. His feet kicked in sequence as if he were trying to walk away from the pain. He was still clutching the automatic; he fumbled with the trigger guard, the barrel wobbled down, the muzzle lodging between two cobblestones. He strained to lift it, his eyebrows arching with effort. The heightened pallor of his skin and the bright blood filming his lips gave him the look of an actor in a Kabuki drama. Chemayev finished him with a bullet to the temple.

He dropped the pistol onto the cobblestones. He had no remorse — March had intended to kill him, hadn't he? — but he was tired, desperately tired, and he felt an odd internal instability, as if the spiritual vacuum created by the death, the instantaneous decompression, had sheared off part of his soul and the remaining portion, now too small for the body it inhabited, was tipping this way and that like the air bubble in a carpenter's

level. He sat down awkwardly, one leg sticking out, the other folded beneath him. Streams of March's blood fingered among the stones — Chemayev imagined them to be a cluster of gray environmental domes in a crimson flood, a mining colony amid the lava flows of Venus. The sound of the splashing water grew louder, troubling his head. He pressed his fingers to his brow, closed his eyes. Fuck. What next? Where did he stand with Larissa? With Yuri and Polutin? He had the suspicion none of it mattered anymore. The victor in this contrived war between himself and March would be trapped forever with an undecaying corpse on the stage set of a magical western, condemned to a limbo in which he would feed on deathly beetles and drink bitter water from a fountain whose splashing kept growing louder and louder. Becoming incredibly, irrationally loud. It was beginning to sound almost like applause.... He opened his eyes. Blinked rapidly due to the unaccustomed brightness. Then scrambled to his feet. The body was gone, the fountain was gone, the stones, the trees, it was all gone, and he was standing on the stage of Eternity's theater, tiers of white leather booths rising on every side into swirling fog, the elegantly attired men and women looking down at him, clapping and cheering. Stricken, overwhelmed by this latest transition, he turned in a circle, hoping to find a point of orientation, something that would explain, that would clarify. He caught sight of Polutin. The big man was standing in the aisle, his head tipped back, belly thrust out, applauding with such ponderous sincerity that Chemayev half-expected to see a ringmaster urging him on with a whip in one hand, a piece of raw fish in the other. On unsteady legs, giddy with the aftershocks of violence, stunned by all he saw, he made his way up from the stage and along the aisle and let Polutin guide him into the booth.

"Why did you take so long? What's wrong with you?" Polutin frowned at him, exasperated; but then he patted Chemayev's knee, the brisk gesture of someone ready to put the past behind them. "You did well," he said. "You may not think so now, but you'll see it eventually." In his sloppy, drink-reddened face was a bearish measure of self-satisfaction that seemed to answer all questions concerning his involvement in the evening's events; but Chemayev was unable to process the information. There was too much to think about. Just the idea that he and March had been part of the entertainment suggested a labyrinthine complexity of

physical and metaphysical relationships sufficient on its own to confound him. And the odd certitude he had felt immediately prior to shooting March, the correspondences between that feeling and March's story about death — what could be made of that? For the life of him, he could not even recall how he had come to this moment. The road that led from a village along the Dvina was easy to follow up to the point he and Nicolai arrived in Moscow, but thereafter it was broken, gapped, and once it entered the darkness of Eternity, everything that had previously been easy to follow came, in retrospect, to seem unfathomable. Polutin began prattling on about a meeting scheduled for the next day with his Italian associates, and the talk of business calmed Chemayev. He tried to achieve a perspective, to reorder the universe according to Chemayevian principles, but the image of March intruded. Another ghost to join that of Nicolai. Not so much guilty baggage attached to this one. Though for a vicious killer, March hadn't been such a bad guy. A slant of wild hilarity broke through his mental overcast. Someday they'd say the same about him.

The background music changed — a saccharine swell of violins flowing into a romantic brocade of darker strings, French horns, trumpets. "Aha!" Polutin said. "The auction!" Disinterested, Chemayev glanced toward the stage. And sat bolt upright. Emerging from the center of the stage, borne upward on a circular platform, was Larissa. Naked. Carrying a silver tray on which lay a single long-stemmed rose. Their eyes met and she looked hurriedly away. Waiting for her on the stage, his thinning hair slicked down, natty in a white suit, holding a microphone, was one of Yuri's portly doubles. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!" he said, and with a florid gesture directed the general attention to Larissa. "THE ROSE!"

As Larissa walked up the aisle, serene in her nakedness, several men shouted bids, which were duly noted by Yuri's double, who plodded along behind her. When she reached Polutin's booth she stopped and trained her eyes on a point above Chemayev's head. Her expression was unreadable.

Chemayev said weakly, "Larissa?"

She betrayed no sign of having heard; he saw nothing but reflected dazzles in the darks of her eyes.

Polutin's arm dropped onto his shoulder. "So, Viktor. How much are you bidding?"

Uncomprehending, Chemayev looked at him, then at Larissa. The

stoniness of her face in contrast with the soft vulnerability of her breasts and the gentle swell of her belly seemed to restate the conflict between what he hoped and what he feared. He had the impulse to take off his coat and cover her, but he didn't move a muscle. "I don't have any money," he said to Polutin. "Not for this. I have some, but...I...." He looked again to Larissa. "Why aren't you at the bar?" He reached for her hand but she pulled away.

"Don't." Her chin trembled. "Don't touch me. Just do what you have to and let me go."

"What's happened? Larissa, please!" Chemayev made as though to slide out of the booth but Polutin caught his arm.

"Be very careful," he said. "I can't save you from this."

Chemayev shook him off, leaned across the table to Larissa. "For God's sake! I still have the money. All of it. What's wrong?"

Yuri's double moved between them, stared at him dispassionately, his thick lips pursed. "You refused to pay," he said. "You broke the contract. Now" — he shrugged — "you can either bid or you can remain here until your debt is paid."

"My debt? I don't owe you...."

"The price of the woman," said the double. "You broke the contract, you forfeit her price."

A tiny nebula of platinum and emeralds glinted among the tangles of Larissa's dark hair. Someone must have given her new earrings. In the silvery light her nipples showed candy pink, her skin milky. A mole the size of a .22 caliber bullet hole on the small of her back above the high, horsey ride of her buttocks. Chemayev realized he was cataloguing these details, filing them away, as if he'd have to remember them for a long time.

"What can I do?" he asked her. "Isn't there anything...?"

"Leave me alone," she said.

His desperation and confusion knitted into a third emotion, something akin to anger but imbued with the sort of hopeless frustration an insect might feel when, after an enduring struggle, it has freed itself from a spiderweb only to fall into an empty jelly glass, where it is peered at by the incurious eyes of an enormous child. Chemayev's hand dropped to the money belt but he did not remove it.

"Make up your mind," said the double. "There are others who may wish to bid."

Chemayev had difficulty unbuttoning his shirt. His fingers felt thick and bloodless, and the inside of his head compacted, as if stuffed with gray rags. Stripping off the belt took an inordinately long time — it seemed to cling to his waist. Finally he managed it. The double grabbed the belt and gave it a shake. "There can't be much here," he said.

"Four million," said Chemayev emptily.

"Four million rubles?" The double scoffed at the figure. "The bid's already much higher than that."

"Dollars," Chemayev said. "It's in gold certificates."

Polutin was aghast. "Four million dollars? Where did you get such a sum?"

"I didn't steal from you. I played the German market. The Dax."

Polutin lifted his glass in salute. "And I thought I was familiar with all your talents."

"FOUR MILLION!" The double roared into his microphone. "VIKTOR CHEMAYEV BIDS FOUR MILLION DOLLARS!"

The assemblage began to cheer wildly, shouts of "Bravo!", fists pounding the tables, women shrieking. Chemayev put his elbows on the table, rested his head in his hands.

"Here," said Larissa, her voice like ashes. She thrust out the rose to him, the bloom nodding stupidly in his face, a knurl of convulsed crimson. He was unable to make sense of the thing. He tried to connect with her again, and when she looked away this time, his eyes ranged over her body like a metal detector over a snowy field, registering the fullness of her thighs, the razor-cut strip of pubic hair, the swollen underside of a breast. The least of her human details — she had withdrawn all else. She dropped the rose onto the block of ice. The bloom nestled against an empty bottle of Ketel One. Melting ice dripped onto the petals. Yuri's double took Larissa by the arm and escorted her toward the stage.

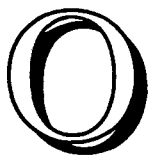
"It might be best for you to leave, Viktor," Polutin said. "Take the morning off. Come see me in my office around three. And be prepared for a difficult negotiation. These Italians will screw us good if they can."

Chemayev laboriously pushed himself up from the booth. People were continuing to cheer, to talk excitedly about the size of the bid. On

stage Yuri sailed one of the gold certificates into the air where it burst into flames; the fire assumed the shape of a pair of flickering wings and then flew apart into a flurry of small orange birds. With gasps and delighted cries, the crowd marveled at what they assumed was a trick, but might well have been something more extraordinary. Yuri bowed, then sailed another of the certificates high — it floated above the heads of the crowd, expanding into a sunburst, becoming a stylized golden mask like the representation of the benign east wind on a medieval map. Golden coins sprayed from its mouth. One of the coins was plucked out of mid-air by a pale dark-haired man wearing a leather trenchcoat. Chemayev had only the briefest glimpse of him before he vanished in the swarm of people scrambling for the coins, but he could have sworn it was March. Niall your fucking Welcome Wagon March, the rage of Kilmorgan, the pale Gombeen Man. Chemayev could not sustain interest in the implications fostered by March's possible presence, but he wondered about the man. Who the hell had March been, anyway? What he said he was, who he variously seemed, or a surprise waiting behind the game show's mystery door?

"Come a little before three," said Polutin. "That way we'll be sure to have time to talk."

As Chemayev turned to leave he noticed the rose. Contact with the cold had darkened the edges of several petals, but it remained an alluring complexity, vividly alive against the backdrop of ice and white linen. After a moment's hesitation he picked it up. Chances were he would only throw it away, but considering the cost, he wanted no one else to claim it.



OUTSIDE, THE SNOW was no longer falling. Long thin curves of windblown powder lay across the asphalt like the ghosts of immense talons; white crusts shrouded the windshields of the surrounding cars. Chemayev sat at the wheel of his Lada, the engine idling, wipers clearing a view of the bunkerlike entrance to Eternity. In the morning, he thought. In the morning when Larissa went to school he'd meet her at the door and ask why she had treated him so coldly. Was it simply because he'd failed her? Maybe they'd threatened her, lied to her. Whatever the reason, he'd be honest. Yes, he'd say, I fucked up. But it's this place that's mostly to blame, this broken down ex-country. Nothing good can happen here. I'm

going to set things right and once we get away I'll be the man you believed in, the one who loves you.... Even as he rehearsed this speech he recognized its futility, but the plug of nothingness that had stoppered his emotions during the auction had worked itself loose, the speedball of failure and rejection had worn off, and all the usual passions and compulsions were sparking in him again.

A gaunt, gray-haired man in a tattered overcoat stumbled into his field of vision. One of the *krushova* dwellers, holding a nearly empty bottle of vodka. He lurched against the hood of a Jaguar parked in the row across from Chemayev, slumped onto the fender, then righted himself and took a pull from the bottle. He wiped his mouth, stared blearily at the Lada, and flung out his arm as if shooing away a dog or an annoying child. "Fuck off," said Chemayev, mostly to himself. The man repeated the gesture, and Chemayev thought that perhaps he had not been gesturing at him, perhaps he'd been summoning reinforcements. Dozens...no, hundreds of similarly disheveled figures were shambling toward him among the ranks of gleaming cars. Bulky women with moth-eaten sweaters buttoned wrong; men in duct-tape-patched hooded parkas, ruined faces peering grimly through portholes lined with synthetic fur; others in ill-fitting uniform jackets of various types; one in rubber boots and long johns. Shadowy drabs and drudges coming from every corner of the lot, as if they were phantoms conjured from the asphalt, as if the asphalt were the black meniscus of Yuri's brimful kingdom. Clinging to one another for support on the icy ground like the remnants of a routed army. Drunk on defeat. They stationed themselves along the row, all glaring at Chemayev, each with a charcoal mouth and inkdrop eyes, faces with the ridged, barren asymmetry of terrain maps, the background figures in an apocalypse by Goya come to life, each beaming at him a black fraction of state-approved, party-sponsored enmity. Yuri's state. Yuri's party.

Less frightened than repelled, Chemayev drew a pistol from his shoulder holster, rolled down the window, and fired into the air. Instead of fleeing they edged forward, clumsy and tentative as zombies, confused by the brightness of life but full of stuporous menace. What did they intend to do? he wondered. Curse him? Puke on him? He poked his head out the window and aimed the pistol at the closest of them, a balding man whose seventy-inch-waist trousers appeared to support his upper half like

a dessert cup filled with two scoops of yellowish cream pudding, the smaller topped by sparse hanks of white hair like shredded coconut, his sweatshirt proclaiming allegiance to the Central Soviet hockey team. He displayed no fear. And why should he? Who'd be fool enough to kill one of Yuri's people? Perhaps he was dead already. Chemayev ducked back into the car. Set the pistol on the dash. He had surrendered so much, he stubbornly refused to admit this last formal measure of defeat. But then the army of the *krushovas* came shuffling forward again and he understood that he had neither the confidence nor the force of arms to stand against them. He shifted the Lada into gear and pulled out along the row, going slowly to avoid hitting the shabby creatures who stood everywhere throughout the lot. They pressed close as he passed, like animals in a preserve, peeking in through the windows, and he had a surge of panic...not true fright, but a less disabling emotion fueled by a shameful recognition of his relationship to these lusterless clots of anti-life, these exhibits in the existential sideshow. Sons and Daughters of the Soil. Old ragged male monsters with the hammer-and-sickle stamped on every cell of their bodies. Boring meat-eaters, ferocious farters, grunters, toilers, industrial oxen, blank-eyed suet-brained party trolls. Old lion-faced women with gray hair sprouting from every pore, ugly with the crap they'd eaten all their lives, their filth-encrusted nails as strong as silicon, breeding warmonger babies in their factory wombs, dead now like empty hangars, cobwebbed, with wheelmarks in the dust.... You couldn't hate them, that'd be the same as hating yourself, you could only say goodbye to all their grim Russian soul shit. You had to cut it out of yourself somehow, you had to sit down and pinch a roll of fat and slide a knife in, probe for that special Russian organ that made you such a bear for suffering, that prompted you to sit up with your mouth open when God came round with his funnel and his tube of black bile to forcefeed all the Russian as-yet-unborns he was fattening for some conflagration on the far side of infinity. You had to put some distance between yourself and this dirt with its own soul that reached up through the bottoms of your feet and moved you like a finger puppet. You had to find some way not to be like these relics, even if that meant killing the most vital part of your spirit. You had to run to America, you had to drown in its trivialities, bathe in its chrome wavelengths until all the scum of Mother Russia was washed off your skin,

until your pores were so open the black oily essence of your birthright came seeping out like juice from a cracked bug. That's what you had to do. That was the only thing that could save you. But it was probably not possible.

Once clear of the *krushovas* Chemayev accelerated along the access road leading to the Garden Ring. Headlights penetrated the Lada, revealing patched brown plaid seat covers, a littered dash, bent ashtray stuffed with candy wrappers. The radio dial flickered, the heater whined and yielded up a smell of burning rubber. The crummy familiarity of the car consoled him, molding itself to him like a friendly old chair. He wanted a cigarette, but Larissa had made him quit. Shit. He rapped the top of the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. Not angrily. A call-to-order rap, a wake-up notice. He banished the feeling of unsoundness that had plagued him most of the night, took stock of his reserves. He pictured them straggled across a parade ground, the survivors of a force that had once numbered four million. He'd have to start over. He'd have to put tonight behind him. Approach tomorrow as if everything were normal. He'd permit himself to make no goals, not even where Larissa was concerned. He'd simply do his job and see what developed. He sped out onto the Garden Ring, merging with the stream of traffic headed for the city center. There was an ache in his chest that seemed part bruise, part constriction, and he knew it would worsen during the weeks ahead. Whenever he stopped for a solitary drink or tried to sleep it would send out fresh tendrils of pain, seeding despair and distraction; but he'd overcome those enemies before, and he could do it again, he would rise to the challenge. That was half of life, the way you dealt with challenges. Maybe more than half. It occurred to him, and not for the first time, that his obsession with Larissa was partially fueled by the challenge she presented, but as always he refused to diminish the purity he accorded the relationship by defining it as a logical consequence of his compulsiveness. He brushed the idea aside, concentrated on the road, and soon his mind began to tick along with its customary efficiency, plotting the day ahead. Call Larissa. See where things stood with her. Then business. What had Polutin said? The Italians. His office. Chemayev decided to set his alarm for eleven o'clock. That should give him plenty of time. No, he thought. Better play it safe. He'd set the alarm for ten. It would not do to be late. ♣



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Robert Reed's novels include Black Milk, Down the Bright Way, An Exaltation of Larks, and Marrow. His one collection of short fiction, The Dragons of Springplace, assembles only a small handful of his many stories. Obviously a man with a restless mind, Mr. Reed continually probes and experiments with his tales, often considering the nature of humanity present and future. Here's his latest inquiry into our state of being.

Market Day

By Robert Reed

“WAKE THEM NICE. BE NICE.”
What am I doing wrong? she wonders.
Not one thing. That's what.

“Remember, it's early for them,” says the man, turning on the last row of long lights. Then again, he tells her, “Be nice.”

She loosens her grip on the broom, not coaxing them quite so hard. Plump sows and hard young boars grunt and push themselves up onto their feet and hands. Sleepy eyes blink. The blue-eyed sow with the freckled face gives her a different look. Angry, sort of. But there's something else, too. As if maybe it knows.

How could it?

It can't. It doesn't. And it won't ever, that's for sure.

“Keep them at this end,” says the man. “I'll get the truck.”

The broom is her broom. As much as these hands are hers. As soon as the man leaves, she swishes it harder, grunting defiantly, the animals knowing to keep away from her when she makes these kinds of noises.

Stupid animals.

The truck is huge, and loud in its own way. It pulls up to the building and stops with a big farting sound. Then the man comes around back and opens the truck's doors, and he says, "Here," while waving. "Help me with the ramp," he says.

The ramp is steel, and cold, and despite her help, heavy.

It's still dark outdoors, the morning air cold enough for her breath to show in the lights. She smells herself while she works. She smells the man. He ate oatmeal and homegrown eggs for breakfast, and drank coffee and took a shit, and now he gives a big belch. From deep inside himself. "Let's get them onboard," he tells her. So she walks back into the building and grabs her broom again, urging the animals along by sweeping at the padded plastic floor. The floor is very clean. Because she uses soap and antibiotics on it, and she does her work so well. Cleanliness is important inside this building. For the sake of the animals, and more important, for the sake of the people who will buy them.

This is the day when they will be bought.

We're riding to the market today, she tells herself.

Grunting softly, she urges everyone to keep moving. A few of the animals shit and pee. Their messes don't matter now; nothing can be done about them now. One or two at a time, they ease their way onto the cold steel ramp, hands and feet acting afraid, not knowing the feel of the strange new surface.

Soft plastic is all they know.

The blue-eyed sow and the biggest boar are last on the ramp. The boar is strong enough to have worried her in the past, and now, shuffling into the truck, it seems to grow larger and more menacing.

"Watch that one," the man advises.

But she's already watching.

The boar turns its head just enough to look back at her, little brown eyes saying something. Warning her, she realizes. Almost too late, she braces herself. She lifts her broom and throws the plastic handle between them, and the boar turns around, rising up on its legs, grabbing at her with both of its thick little hands.

The man says, "Shit."

Says, "Jesus."

The boar has her by an arm and the broom handle. For a long moment,

they shove at each other. But just as the boar doesn't know anything except walking on soft plastic, it doesn't know how to fight. She lets it push on her left side, and she lets herself crumble suddenly. The boar finds itself tumbling forward. Then she drives it over onto its back and grunts wildly and shows her teeth, its hands fighting for any grip, the broom handle snapping under the hard tugging.

A clean white rage takes her.

This was her broom. Since forever, it was. With the shattered handle, she beats the scared animal, slamming her weapon down against its exposed ribs and its soft brown flesh. Maybe six blows are delivered before the man takes the weapon from her hands, telling her, "Stop it! Now, stop it!"

The boar cowers beneath her, both hands trying to shield its tightly closed eyes. A little moan leaks from it, and something that almost sounds like words.

Like, "Please. No."

Which infuriates her even more. She kicks it once in the crotch, just missing the dangling balls, taking every satisfaction from its piercing wail.

The man strikes her with the broom handle.

On the head.

Twice.

Then she drops and sobs, and he throws his arms around her neck, his bristly face against her face, his scared soft sorry voice telling her, "I didn't. I shouldn't have. Please, forgive me...please...?"

Cold darkness turns into a cold bright morning.

Together they climb into the high cab of the truck. She's always thrilled to ride anywhere, but particularly when they take animals to market. The man is usually in a happy mood. That earlier episode is an exception, an aberration. If he doesn't smell happy and relaxed, she tells herself, that's only because he feels an aching guilt for striking her. Which is exactly how he should feel, of course.

As if remembering the custom, he puts on a smile.

He says, "Here we go," and tells the truck where they want to be.

The engine purrs, and they pull away from the long plastic building,

passing the man's house and the steel barn, then the old wooden barn with its tilted walls and steeply slumping roof. For as long as she can remember, that barn has looked ready to collapse on itself. Yet there it stands, still. And that's the way all the world works. The man has told her so, on many occasions. Things only seem unstable and treacherous, but really, most everything likes to stay the same. He says. Only a fool or a coward believes that his life, in the end, won't work out for the best.

The man asks the truck for the weather, then the news.

She doesn't listen. Not to the voices coming from the dashboard or to the man's muttering little comments.

What she does is sit up straight, watching the countryside slide past. A week has passed since her last ride, and in that little while, spring has arrived. Blackish green shoots are punching their way up through the black plastic. The crops are laid out in perfect lines, each plant rooted in a buried conduit. Warm water and nutrients are carried to them. Each plant looks the same as its neighbors, but as the spring warms, each will be told what to grow and how to grow it. By summer, the fields will be tangled with jungles growing raw bread and blocks of fancy plastic and steaks in leather purses and seal fur and perfumes and thinking chips and anything else that someone somewhere in the world seems to want.

It's very complicated, knowing what to grow. Complicated and easy to be wrong, and that's why the smart people sold their land to the big companies, then put their cash into smaller, more profitable crops.

That's what the man taught her, long ago.

Almost too late, she looks back at her home, the steel barn shining in the new sunlight like a mirror. Or like a very hot, very still fire.

Then the little farm is swallowed up by the cold black fields.

She looks ahead, knowing this road perfectly. And the next road, too. Then they turn onto the highway, gaining speed until nobody can pass them, and their truck jumps sideways, fitting neatly between two other trucks.

Sometimes she hears the animals over the humming of the road.

They grunt or they cry out.

Once, for a strange long minute, the animals almost sound as if they're trying to sing together, an ugly little tune seeping through the walls of the cab.

Gradually, it occurs to her that she wouldn't normally hear anything, that the man should be filling the air with happy talk about the money coming and what they would do with it, in celebration. But he seems to have lost his voice. For a long while, he doesn't even mutter to himself, listening to the quiet voices who keep repeating the news. Those voices talk about places she doesn't know and people she can never meet, and what little she can pull from the words doesn't seem to concern them. She listens for "organs," but not even the church kind is mentioned. And then gradually, gradually, it occurs to her that the man isn't listening to anything. That he's just sitting behind the unused steering wheel, thinking hard about a thousand important things.

Because she wants to know, she asks, "What are you thinking?"

He gives her a funny look. But instead of answering, he says, "That's none of your business."

She drops her eyes, and waits.

Then talking more to himself than her, he says, "You've never asked that question before."

She lifts her eyes, trying to use them.

But he just looks away, sighing twice, then telling nobody in particular, "I don't know what I'm thinking. Anymore, I just don't."

HE HAS TOLD her this isn't a large city, but it's the only city she knows. She can't remember some of the buildings, which is usual enough. New homes and offices and helper quarters are always being built. But then again, she hasn't been here since last year, and not that much has changed. All things considered.

Like always, she remembers each turn that takes them to the market. She remembers the sleek buildings on both sides of the last busy road. What is new is the tall sign beside the final corner. What gets her attention are its swirling lights, bright even on this bright morning, and while she watches the lights, they make arms, and hands, then a body and legs, and finally, a strange squarish head.

"What's that?" she asks.

The man doesn't hear her. Maybe.

In the next moment, those pieces knit themselves together.

Words appear above the new person, and she sounds out each of them. "Who," she whispers. "Has the right," she adds, louder this time. "But God?" And feeling proud of herself, she asks, "What does that mean?"

"Huh?" says the man.

They've already driven passed the sign, so she repeats its message from memory. Then she asks, "What does 'right' mean?"

"It's a lot of things," he says

She doesn't think so. "And what's 'God' mean?"

"Nobody really knows," is his answer.

She doesn't know what to think. So instead of thinking, she watches them drive along the last road. The market building is large, but not as large as some. A sign out front has the market's fancy name, followed by the words, "The World's First Provider!" There's always been a tall gate out front. But the gate is closed this morning, which is different than every other time. Standing behind the black bars are both kinds of men. The new men are huge and strong, wearing thick gray uniforms. Her man says, "Wait," for no reason. Doesn't she know when to stay put?

The truck knows to stop short, then her man jumps down, walking toward the gate as he says something to the oldest men.

After a minute, the gate pulls open.

There aren't many cars resting next to the building, she notices. Which is different, too. Her man climbs back in, telling the truck to move and move slowly. She tilts her head and listens. But if the animals are singing, their voices are too soft to be heard.

A doctor in a long coat waits at the back door.

Because she knows him, and because she does this every time, she opens her door and jumps down, shouting, "Hello, Dr. Aarons!"

Nobody notices her.

"Glenn," says the doctor.

Her man says, "Cold enough?"

"Oh, sure."

Her man waits for a moment, then says, "I've got a full load."

The doctor's face is smoother than last time. And more tired.

"These are good ones," says her man.

"Well," the doctor says. "Let's have a look then."

Her man doesn't speak, or move. He just stands, hands hanging,

acting as if he can't remember where he left his truck.

Dr. Aaron turns to her. "Would you help me?"

She's thrilled to be noticed. And of course she'll help. Working together, they extend the steel ramp, then walk up it, the doctor letting her open the first door. The animals stand back from the door, but not too far. Then her man is beside her. She hears him taking a few deep breaths. Then he says, "Back," to the animals. He says, "Be good," almost too softly to be heard.

The doctor pulls a wand from his long coat.

To warn the animals, the tip of the wand glows red. With his free hand, he opens the mesh door, stepping inside and waving the wand just once, a hard sharp crackling making everyone jump. The animals, and her, too.

Then her man talks. He says, "You know me, sir." He says, "I always deliver a good clean product."

The doctor doesn't say anything.

"Besides," says her man, "we've got a contract already."

With the wand, the doctor eases the blue-eyed sow to one side, holding her against the metal wall while a clean barb sticks her in a freckle, just once, taking a little sip of blood.

"A contract," her man repeats, talking to himself.

The wand does its work, and the doctor stands there, waiting.

"An honorable agreement," her man mutters. "With a set price."

The wand says something in its sharp little language, and the doctor nods and says, "You're right. She's clean."

"Told you," her man says, hiding a belch with his hand.

The doctor moves to the next animal, taking a sip of blood and waiting again, the same machine words telling that this one, again, is in the very best of health.

A third animal is tested.

A fourth.

Then a fifth, and sixth, and so on.

She can't remember when the doctors tested all of them. A few sips are enough, since sicknesses and worms would have been shared among the animals. But Dr. Aarons keeps testing, and her man keeps muttering about the contract and what is fair and what is right. A lot of things are right, she nearly says. Has he forgotten?

In the back, waiting to be last, is the dangerous boar.

Her man turns silent, watching as the doctor pins the boar with the wand, then looks hard at its black-and-blue places.

"Oh, that," her man blurts. "It was an accident. The poor thing fell off the ramp this morning."

The doctor takes blood and says nothing.

"Bruises heal," her man says.

"They do," Dr. Aarons agrees. Then his wand makes a soft sound, a different sound, and he reads what has been found, stepping to the back end of the truck and folding up the wand, saying to her man, "I'm sorry — "

"It's a fucking bruise!" he blurts out.

"No," says the doctor. "I'm talking about the herpes."

"The what?"

"There's a new strain in some of the cultures," the doctor explains. "It's hard to detect, but I've got to assume that they all have it...which is why I've got no choice but to refuse this particular shipment...."

Her man says nothing.

What he does, if anything, is grow smaller. She can almost see it happening. He's standing on the tilted steel ramp, in the cold sunshine, and he dips his head and shrinks down and takes a few breaths, too small to make any difference. Then he gives a little moan and lifts his head, a whispering voice saying, "That's a goddamn lie. You were just hunting for any excuse — "

"Glenn," says the doctor.

He's talking from below now. From the concrete ground.

"Glenn," he says, sounding almost sad. Then a pair of new men step up beside him, and the doctor says, "Naturally, you can challenge my findings in court. If that's what you want to do, Glenn."

Her man shakes his little face, saying nothing.

"I am sorry. Believe me."

He sounds sorry, and sad, and helpless.

But when she looks at the doctor, he seems tall and strong. Nearly as strong as the new men standing beside him, waiting for orders. Their skin is this color, then that color. Whatever was cheapest on the day they were made. Their big hands hang at their sides, boar fingers and thumbs curled up into fists. And things worse than any wand ride inside their little leather holsters, waiting for any reason to be used.

THEY'RE DRIVING again. Toward home, she guesses.

She assumes that much can still happen. When her man makes an unexpected turn, she guesses that they're on their way to this court place. What's wrong will be made right again. Nothing important has changed. Only a fool or the most cowardly coward would think otherwise.

A tiny concrete building wears a drab little sign.

"Mel's," the sign tells the world. "Come in and refresh yourself."

The man orders the truck to pull off the road and park.

"What should I do?" she asks.

He doesn't seem to hear. But as he's climbing down, he says, "I don't care. Do whatever you want."

She wants to follow him.

Inside, the darkness is sudden and warm, and she can smell things that are strange, then familiar. Whenever her man leaves for the night, he comes home smelling this way. He comes home happy. So this must be a good happy place, she decides.

He climbs up on a stool, setting his elbows on a long high table, then says, "Beer," to nobody in particular.

A stranger stands behind the table. He brings the beer in a thick glass, stares at her man, then just walks away.

Most of the stools are empty. She sits next to her man. There's another empty stool beside her, so she puts her feet up on it to be comfortable. She wiggles her toes. A woman sits alone next to her wiggling toes. "Hello," she says to the woman.

The woman has scars, but they barely show in the darkness. Whoever built her face made it to look pretty. Was it the standing man who built her? She has freckles and blue eyes and a smile that comes easily.

"Hello to you," the smiling woman says. Then she points at her man, her finger long and painted. "Does he belong to you?"

"It's the other way around," she explains.

Isn't it obvious?

"Does your owner want to know me?"

She asks her man, "Do you want to know her?"

"Not now," he says to his beer.

"Not now," she repeats, glad to be his only friend.

But the woman keeps smiling in her special way, waiting for the man to look at her. And when he happens to glance in her direction, she says, "Watch." And with one hand, she reaches into her mouth, pulling out all of her teeth.

With a sloppy voice, the woman says, "Imagine."

The man breathes deeply. Twice. Then he looks at the standing man, telling him, "Not now. Get her off me."

The standing man wipes his hands against his apron, then tells the toothless woman, "Put them back in. And just sit there."

The woman does what she's told.

She wonders what could she do to look as pretty as that woman. But even with the same pretty eyes and the big smile, she realizes that she wouldn't be the same. Which bothers her somehow. Why does it bother her? She thinks about that for a long while. Long enough for the man to drink another beer. Then she wonders something else. She asks the pretty woman, "Why don't you get some real teeth?"

The woman looks at her. Looks and says nothing.

"Teeth that won't come loose," she advises. Then she gives her own a good hard tug, adding, "Like these. See?"

The woman shrugs and turns away, saying nothing.

Her man starts a third beer. She looks at him, then asks, "What are you thinking?"

His thinking machine is set out on the table, unfolded and showing him words. But he doesn't seem to be reading. The words are marching past, but his eyes are glassy and sad, and faraway. They almost look wet, and she wonders what sort of dirt got in them.

Again, she asks, "What are you thinking?"

"Don't ask me that again. Ever."

He says it quietly, but not softly. He says it so that she's left hurting, wondering what's wrong and what she could do to make things better.

But then, even after warning her, he says, "I'm just reading my policy."

"Policy?" she repeats. "What's that?"

"My insurance," he says.

"What's insurance?"

"It's another kind of game." He looks over at the standing man, then whispers, "Nothing. Forget it." He folds up his thinking machine and puts it in his pocket, then shouts, "Can I get a six-pack to go?"

The standing man looks at him, then says, "If you let your car drive."

"It's a truck," her man says.

"Can it drive itself?"

"Can it?" he asks her.

Right away, she says, "Yes, and it's very fast, too!"

"Then buy anything you want," says the standing man. "Is a six-pack going to be enough?"

"Sure," says her man, climbing off the stool and heading for the door.

She jumps down, following.

The pretty new woman stays on her seat, like she's suppose to. Is she pretty because she looks so young? That woman could be five hours old, or five years old. Or she might be a mixture of old pieces and other parts that are brand new.

If I could just get some new pieces for myself, she tells herself. Then she thinks about the blue-eyed sow waiting in the truck, and the steel barn where she was born, and her man touching her softly as he does that very careful, very important work, giving her the blue eyes and soft pink freckles, too.

Her man waits long enough for her to climb into the cab. Then the truck pulls out into traffic, and they're driving again. She didn't hear him tell the truck where, but they're moving back toward the market again.

"Did court help?" she asks.

He doesn't say anything. Then he sets aside an empty beer can and asks, "What do you mean? What court?"

"That place we were," she says. "Did it help us?"

He pulls his mouth into a funny shape as he says, "Yeah, it helped. But it's no court of law. Not even close."

Whatever the place was, things are better again.

That's what matters, she tells herself. All the way to the market, she smiles and feels good about everything. But then the truck doesn't slow down like it should. It forgets where they're going, rolling past the closed gate and the long building. With her face pressed to her window, she looks at the new men looking out through the tall bars. They're not watching

her. They're watching a line of people standing on the very edge of the street, each one of them holding up a sign. All of them are old people, and their signs are brightly colored, and they're chanting in one voice, making no sense. But she sounds out what words she can see on their signs as the truck swiftly carries her past them.

"Wrong," she quotes.

"Evil," she manages.

"Frank," she mutters. Then, "Stein."

Her man opens another can of beer and drinks and says nothing. He doesn't seem at all concerned that they've missed the market.

"Wrong," she repeats. "What is it that's wrong?"

He drinks his beer and almost looks at her. Then he stops himself, breathes deeply and tells her, "When you don't do what I say."

"That's wrong," she admits.

"Remember that."

When has she forgotten that? But instead of saying it, she asks, "Why did we drive past the market?"

He breathes again. Even deeper this time.

"Was it those people?" she asks. "The ones with the signs?"

"Yeah," he says. "They're part of the problem."

For a little moment, she imagines having her broom again. It's repaired and in her hands again, and she's pushing those loud people away from the market, clearing them out of the way for their truck to pass.

"Overproduction," he says.

Those are two words, she realizes. But he said them as one.

"What's 'over-production'?" she asks.

"That's the other half of this big fucking nightmare," he says. Not explaining what he means. Instead he finishes his beer and sets the empty can under his legs, and he opens still another can, giving the foam a deep long slurp.

She looks outside again.

Little buildings stand up near the street. They remind her of the market building, only nobody waits behind their gates and there aren't any cars or trucks parked in front of them. "For Sale," says one sign. "No Something-Passing," say others. But she can't concentrate on her reading just now. Her mind keeps jumping around, and she can barely think about anything at all, it seems.

The street lifts, crossing a straight ridge of dirt and grass.

On the other side of the ridge are leafless trees and new green grass, and the street turns to gravel, winding its way through the trees. She almost asks where they are. But then he explains, "This is a park."

"It's very pretty here," she offers.

"I guess," he replies, his voice sloppy and slow.

There's water up ahead. Big dark water, and she slowly realizes that it's moving. Like piss down a chute, it slides along, and she takes a breath, then says, "This looks like a very nice place."

He doesn't say anything to her.

To the truck, he says, "Park. Anywhere."

The street ends with a wide area of gravel and muddy pools. He opens another beer and says, "Jump down and come around."

Now he's talking to her.

The outside air is cold and wet. A little wind blows over the river, and she hears the wind and hears the sound of water slooshing and twisting against itself and the muddy banks. A concrete ramp vanishes into the water. It looks like a street covered by a peaceful flood. But she can't marvel at the sight because she needs to come all the way around the truck.

"I'm drunk," he tells her.

His voice sounds wet and sad and clumsy.

"Help me down, would you?"

Gladly. She reaches up and grabs one hand and its arm, and she eases him down to where he can stand upright, propped against the truck.

"My other beers...give them to me..."

Not so gladly, she obeys him.

"Stay there."

It hurts, watching him stagger over to a nearby bench. But he manages to sit and open up another can of beer, and before he takes his first sip, he looks up and says, "Get the tool box. From behind the seat."

The tool box is heavy and clumsy. And loud when she sets it on the ground.

"There's a thick gray wire," he says. "Under that wheel there. Inside the cab, yeah. I want you to unfasten it."

She asks, "How?"

He seems to consider that simple question. Then he says, "With the pry bar. Just jerk it right off there...!"

The job takes several minutes. Enough time to empty another can.

"All right," he mutters. "Now climb inside. Right where I sit."

She starts up, then pauses. Looking back over her shoulder, she asks, "Why?"

Again, he thinks about it. Then he stands and shuffles his way over to her, saying, "It's just this simple. These animals aren't worth anything alive. But my insurance'll pay if they die. In an accident."

She says nothing. Watching him.

"It's nothing but simple," he says. "Put that lever there over one notch, then push the pedal. The one that just came up out of the floor. And you'll start backing up, which means you've got to steer...with the wheel there...."

She can't speak, or think.

"I'll help you," he promises. "I'll tell you where you're going, where you need to get...okay, darling...?"

She finishes her climb and sits behind the wheel. But that's all. Sitting there is the only thing she can do now.

He tries to explain it again.

"If I'm the one driving," he says, "it looks wrong. You see? But if I came here to drink, and while I was doing that, you broke the driver and took the wheel...and made a little mistake while I was drinking...."

She can barely understand his slurring voice.

Again, he calls her, "Darling."

He's crying now. That's how much it means to him.

With a crying voice, he screams, "Will you, please?"

The engine has been left running. As ordered, she moves the lever one place and starts to put her foot on the pedal, and he takes a big step backward, telling her, "And shut your door. Go on. That's it!"

She's never felt so scared.

He takes a huge gulp of beer, then starts moving his hands, showing her what to do.

She turns the wheel, and the truck backs up and backs up, its trailer easing its way onto the concrete ramp. When the back tires hit the water, she feels it. A resistance starts to fight her, and in response, she pushes the pedal harder. Then comes the odd sense that the truck is being lifted behind her, as if some great soft hand wants to keep it level. And then, as the cold water starts to leak through the doors, filling the long dark trailer, the animals, in one great voice, start to scream.

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Her man stands on top of the ramp, waving with both arms.

"Is this right?" she shouts.

"Keep. Backing. Up!" he answers.

She realizes that she doesn't know how to drive any way but backward. He forgot to tell her that part. In confusion, she lifts her hands from the wheel and her foot from the pedal, asking, "How much more?"

He shouts his answer, but all she can hear are the animals.

In a great shared voice, they have begun to sing, voices roaring and her listening to them as the river carries the trailer downstream, dragging the cab after it.

Then all at once, she's singing too, trying her very best to follow the melody and wishing all the time that she knew their words, wishing that she just once had bothered to listen to these silly little songs of theirs....





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Dance of Knives, by Donna McMahon, TorBooks, 2001, \$25.95.

I ALWAYS enjoy discovering a new writer who gets everything right the first time out. Not only for the entertainment value at hand, of course, but in anticipation of the books that are to come. Well, Donna McMahon doesn't just show promise with *Dance of Knives*, she delivers the real goods from the first page through to the last, so I know I'll be looking for whatever she writes next. But for now:

After a mysterious prologue that soon fits into the ongoing plotlines, we meet our main point of view character, a rather innocent young woman named Klale Renhardt, as she arrives in a twenty-second century Vancouver that has deteriorated to barely workable levels. Klale is also determined and spunky, but her innocence makes her a perfect viewpoint character to

lead the reader into this brave, if somewhat dilapidated, new world. It's a tried-and-true trope of sf, but it also works because it allows us to get a handle on what everyone else takes for granted in the metropolis; the commonplace is new for her (and of course for the reader) and we get to explore it together.

Klale has left behind her old life in the fisher guild to the south to make a go of it in the big city, but she soon manages to run afoul of the Harbour Patrol (the local police force) after coming to the rescue of the bartender of the KlonDyke during a brawl in the bar. Then, after a politically charged striptease during the "open mike" portion of the evening, she lands herself a job in the same bar and begins to make a new life for herself among the other employees of this gay bar.

But if this is great near-future sf, it's also part spaghetti western by way of Mary Shelley.

There are classic showdown shoot-'em-ups between the bar

employees, the various tongs that run the city, the Harbour Patrol, and the disenfranchised guildless. There's fascinating speculation into how the world got to this state and how the various elements of life in this city work in particular. And then there's our Frankenstein monster — the mute, deaf, genetically enhanced and changed "tool" known as Blade. A towering tragic figure, at once as innocent as Klale and as deadly as anything from a raptor to the Terminator.

What gives the book its heart are the deft interactions that connect Klale, the dangerous Blade, and the bartender Toni, with her mysterious past. The characterizations ring true throughout, but the triangle formed by these three is what captures a reader's interest and holds it there, from when we first begin to understand the tangled relationships between the three, all the way through to the book's surprising and satisfying conclusion.

It doesn't hurt that McMahon, for all that she's a new author, has the writing chops of a seasoned pro.

This is a wonderful debut.

All the Rage, by F. Paul Wilson, Gauntlet Publications, 2000, \$50.

It seems that Repairman Jack, first introduced to us in *The Tomb*

(1984), has now become the protagonist of a series with this fourth volume chronicling the adventures of a man living on the outside of society who "fixes" unusual problems for a fee.

In some ways Repairman Jack is like a middle-class version of Andrew Vachss's Burke character. Unlike Burke — who survived a childhood and adolescence of abuse, living on the streets and in prison to become the man he is today — Jack appears to have chosen his lifestyle. It makes for a worldview that is less dark, and certainly less desperate. Vachss's character also undergoes major changes from book to book. The latest, *Dead and Gone*, is a prime example; by the end of the novel, everything about Burke's life has been redefined, though his core persona remains fixed and true.

Repairman Jack is more of an Indiana Jones type of character. Each new adventure takes the reader on an entertaining roller coaster ride while Jack's circumstances remain constant. But I don't mean to imply that this is a bad thing. I've been fond of the character since his initial appearance and was delighted when Tor published a new book early in 2000 (*Conspiracies*), with the promise of more to come.

Tor will also be publishing the trade edition of *All the Rage*, but

I'm reviewing the book from the galley provided by Gauntlet Publications, who have done the limited signed hardcover. Because it's a galley, I can't comment on the production values, but I can certainly recommend the story itself.

This time out Repairman Jack is hired by Nadia Radzminsky, a young researcher who's worried about her boss's safety when she sees him being bullied by a gangster named Milos Dragovic, an arms and drug dealer. Complicating matters is the appearance of a new designer drug that in small doses boosts one's confidence, and in larger ones creates a berserk rage in the user. Jack gets a firsthand glimpse of the latter when a reunion of preppie businessmen runs amok in downtown New York, endangering the lives of Jack's girlfriend Gia and her daughter Vicky.

Further complicating matters is the reappearance of one of the demonic rakoshi (first seen way back in *The Tomb*) that's being harbored by the Ozymandias Prather Oddity Emporium, a traveling freak show that readers might remember from *Freak Show*, the anthology Wilson edited for the Horror Writers of America.

Drugs, freaks, gangsters, rakoshi, and drug designers all combine to make a fast-paced thriller

with Repairman Jack at the center of the action, working a desperate balancing act to keep his clients and friends alive while making sure justice is served. If you enjoy a hardboiled mystery, with a dash of the supernatural and a good helping of suspense and action, then Wilson's latest is the book for you.

Fantasy Art Masters, by Dick Jude, Watson-Guptill, 1999, \$24.95.

The book's subtitle says it all: "The Best Fantasy and Science Fiction Artists Show How They Work." Though I'd quibble at "best" since — and yes, I know this is subjective — there are some telling names missing from the roll call of those included here. Just for starters, where are Michael Whelan, Brian Froud, J. K. Potter, Charles Vess, or the Dillons?

But no matter. Those artists who do appear between this book's covers are all strong contenders: Rick Berry, Brom, Jim Burns, Fred Gambino, John Howe, Alan Lee, Dave McKean, Don Maitz, Chris Moore, and Steve Stone.

And I love the scope of the work as it's been presented to us, from fine-line pencils and watercolors, through oils and acrylics, all the way to work created on a computer.

But the best part of the book, beyond the stunning reproductions, is that most of the text is from the artists' point of view — direct quotations from interviews conducted by Jude that give great insight into everything from the nuts-and-bolts of their approaches through to their artistic philosophies and anecdotes concerning specific illustrative jobs.

The reproductions, as I've already mentioned, are gorgeous, but we're also treated to a lot of background material: sketches, photo references, and various stages of the work before the artist says, "This is done," and signs the final painting. As can be the case (or at least it often is in my case), many of the preliminary pieces are so strong in their own right — painterly, filled with energy — that they overshadow the actual finished paintings.

Every lover of fantastical art, not to mention any artist entering the field, should definitely get themselves a copy of this book.

Spectrum 7, edited by Cathy & Arnie Fenner, Underwood Books, 2000, \$27.50.

And that last sentence of the previous review is probably a good

place for me to follow up with a brief mention of Cathy & Arnie Fenner's annual collection of the best fantastical art of the past year, now in its seventh volume.

Like the two wonderful St. Martin's Press *Year's Best* anthologies of short fiction put together each year by Gardner Dozois and the editorial team of Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, the claim that what we find in these pages is the actual best work of the year is certainly open to discussion. But with that said, it's difficult to fault the quality of the selection that is represented, and where else will you get so much of the year's top art between two covers?

Considering the high quality of the paper stock and the superb production values, *Spectrum 7* is a bargain and also a must-have for any serious fantasy art lover's library.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

I 'VE probably mentioned this before, but it bears repeating: Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* was one of three texts responsible for leading me to penetrate the shiny surface of the sf field, looking for questions, the right questions, to ask about life, the past, the present, and the future.

Novels are rarely a place to look for answers. But novelists bring an eclectic (and mostly invisible) experience to their works, and very often, in reading works of fiction, truths are brought into focus, put under the magnifying glass, dissected, and brought to life again in ways that make novels the perfect place to search for the right questions. The fact that not all of these truths are evident to all readers makes reading what it so clearly is: a personal experience; a private communication between printed page and reader.

The Left Hand of Darkness was

the first novel that I had read, at that time, that focused so clearly on duality and difference as a bridge, rather than a wall, when at that time so many other things in life emphasized similarity, assimilation, the ability to fit in, to belong. It was a theme that was explored in other Hainish novels, such as *City of Illusions* and *The Word for World Is Forest*. But, being the callow youth I was then, none of this would have had impact were it not for Le Guin's ability to bind these philosophies into a character with whom I could identify, a story which moved me, and consequences which made me examine whole lives, not just the fictive one.

Le Guin has written quite a few Hainish stories in the past decade, but *The Telling* is her first Hainish novel in years. Even when I read the earlier works, they had been under the microscope for a decade, and the gap between then and now — for me, as I can't speak for her — has been filled with the mundanities of

daily life, education, work, marriage, children, morning to night spreading out in one jagged but continuous stretch. To return from that path to the universe of the Ekumen filled me with an odd anxiety, because I've learned over the years that you can't go home — but I've never quite gotten the knack of not desiring that return from time to time.

First, let me say a bit about *The Telling*. It was, according to the author's introductory note in the advance reading copy, a story that grew out of her own ruminations about China and its political situation; about an ancient but living culture, plowed under by a new ruler, a new ruler's vision. She emphatically states that the world of her novel, Aka, is *not* China, but rather something that grew out of those thoughts, so reading this with a historian's eye is pointless.

That said, this is the novel that Le Guin writes best: a poetic exercise that acknowledges in full measure the humanity of the people who give any philosophy about living its breadth and depth. Suttty, the novel's protagonist, is a woman who grew up on Terra during a brief and vicious resurgence of fanatic monotheism. She does not dwell on it, but it has affected the whole of her

life, including the decision to join the Ekumen as an Observer. She travels to Aka as one of four Observers, and lives a sterile life, set apart in the end from anything she had hoped to accomplish by the men and women who live in the world's ruling city: Dovza. She is fed the official line of their regime: Down with the Old, Rationalism over Religion, Commerce over Superstition; they are a people who desperately want what the worlds of the Ekumen have achieved: technological progress. But they approach it with a zeal and a complete fanaticism that Suttty has experienced before, to her lasting regret.

She is surprised, in the gray of her daily life, by an offer: One member of the team of four Observers has (after eighty-one requests) been given permission to travel to the Aka that exists outside of the boundaries of Dovza. And the head of the team, Tong Ov, has chosen Suttty to be that one. She doesn't want to go, especially not when he tells her that he has chosen her because of the background that she doesn't speak of.

But she does go, in the end. And on the way to her backwater destination, in a boat of all things, she finally meets the faces beneath the reserved and official masks of Aka.

In some ways, the heart of the novel begins with, and is described by, the beginning of that journey:

"These dull and fragmentary relations of ordinary lives could not bore her. Everything she had missed in Dovza City, everything the official literature, the heroic propaganda left out, they told. If she had to choose between heroes and heroines, it was no contest."

And so with the novel.

Sutty lands on a small dock, and wanders through the streets to the first open doors she sees; she is greeted by a crippled woman and her nephew, who use, in that first meeting, forms of speech that are forbidden. They offer her room and board for what she sees as a ridiculously small amount of money, and she chooses to stay there while the life that the Dovzan officials decry unfolds before her.

She is followed, however, by a Monitor, an official of the Ministry that has chosen to burn all books and neuter all language, and he is what she is loathe to admit she hates: officious. Cold. Bureaucratic. He warns her of what to avoid, and she chooses instead to avoid him — but her past experiences cause her to judge him, despise him.

And so she continues to examine the things she values: the day-

to-day life of a culture that has been driven underground, sometimes brutally. Their language comes first, snippets of their old script in faded letters on a shop wall; the Telling comes next, and from that, the things they most value: the words that they have lived to both speak and hear.

Sutty believes at first that the Telling must be a religious ceremony, but quickly discovers that nothing is easily pinned down; not even the Telling itself. The stories aren't fixed; they change, generation by generation, and each version is as valued and respected as the last. She discovers that there is no god, are no gods, that there is no exclusivity; that if there are rules, they are muted and subtle, rather than the commandments she has come to expect from her own experiences. She values the lessons and the people who teach them; she feels at home for the first time in a very long time — but it is not the home of her adult choice; it is the home of her childhood, rich with the colors and relationships her adult life lacks.

Ultimately, she discovers the books. For the Akans know that the Ekumen is valued, valuable, and they hope that with the Ekumen behind her she might somehow

preserve the wisdom in the texts themselves; the knowledge of, the stories of, the past. If they are preserved unchanging, so be it — they are at least preserved. They offer to lead her to one of the libraries that was not burned to the ground, and she agrees to accompany them.

But she is still being watched, and in the end, when she is forced to confront her watcher what she sees — perhaps what is always seen — is a shattered, but recognizable mirror.

Where once Le Guin celebrated difference, made of it the bridge across which two aliens might meet, she has turned her gaze in another direction; she shows us the obvious difference, and then slowly and gently peels it away.

This is not a novel that would have shattered my younger self's life. I am not certain I would have had the patience for it — being, as I was, someone who was looking for either alienation or heroes. It is a quieter book, a subtler work, spare without being dull, poetic without excess.

I turned the last page of *The Telling*, closed the cover, and thought for a long time about the nature of the heroic; about the phrase, *belief is the wound that knowledge heals*, about how a small act, in the right place, becomes, as

its effects ripple outward almost endlessly, a great act.

And I thought, as well, that if you cannot go home, you can, with some wisdom, still return to an old friend's side and discover that their experiences have not changed the compulsion they feel to question, and to encourage questions, in a humane way that sees, Observes, and tries very hard not to judge.

Robin McKinley is back in fairy tale country, and while I desperately want another Damar novel (and technically, I believe that this might take place in the same world because of references made to Damarian histories, albeit as favorite stories), McKinley fans should nonetheless rejoice. "Beauty and the Beast" was the source for two fine novels, *Beauty* and *Rose Daughter* respectively, as was "Deerskin," for the novel of the same name. In *Spindle's End*, she turns her pen to the tale of "Briar Rose," or "Sleeping Beauty," and the results are sheer joy.

One does not read retellings of fairy tales for the surprise their plots provide. It's a given that things will work out, more or less happily, and more or less in keeping with the story — or stories — that were their source.

Well, sort of.

McKinley has made some significant changes in the plot and in the characters upon whom that plot rests, while retaining much of the same trappings (the part about the fairy godmothers' gifts is particularly amusing). What she has done — and what she always does so well — is to give life and depth to characters who weren't really characters at all in earlier tellings.

For instance, the fairies upon whom the princess — called Rosie, rather than any one of her twenty-one birth names — depends are very untraditional fairy tale denizens. It seems that the kingdom in which Rosie lives is overrun with magic. Magic is literally a dust that settles over everything, and if it isn't cleaned mercilessly, you end up with unfortunate occurrences (like, say, having your cereal turn into spiders). Some people are born with a particular gift for using that magic — and those people are called, for want of a better word, fairies. It is entirely probable that a fairy might have a nonmagical brother or parent; being a fairy and being a human are not mutually exclusive activities.

Pernicia is a fairy with a burning hatred for Rosie's family line, in particular for the last queen who

ruled some four hundred years ago. She wants vengeance, in the form of, say, destroying the entire kingdom, and she wishes to start with Rosie, hence the need to have a baby spirited away and hidden. Obviously, to combat a woman who has become a master of magic, you want women who at least have some claim to be experts — but because fairies are, in the end, both human and mortal, much of the novel's charm resides in their story, related though it is to the story of the Princess.

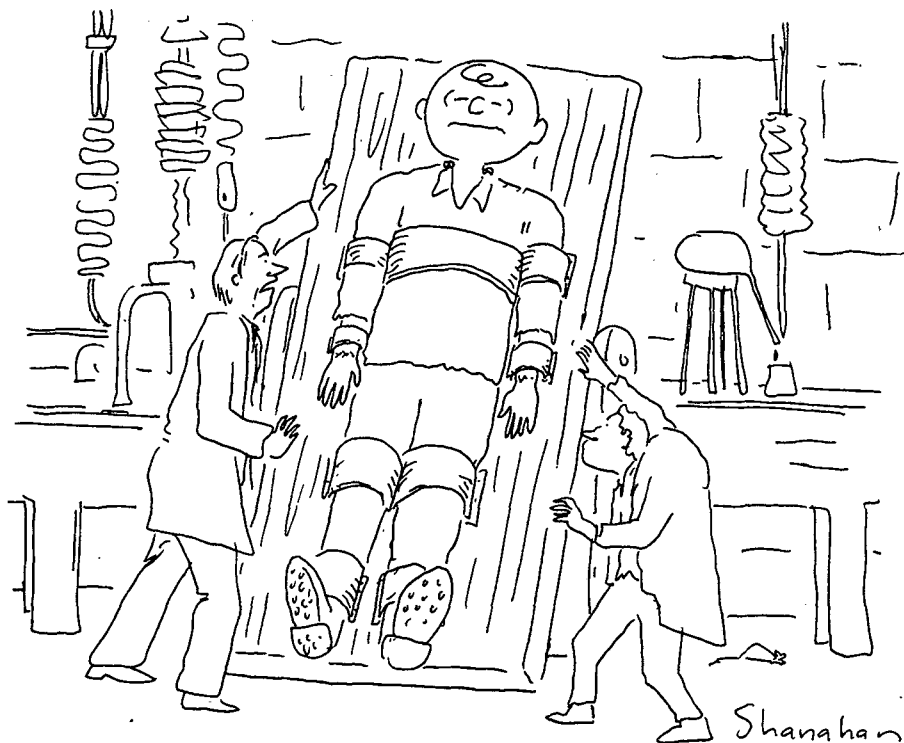
There is, I should add, a prince, a magical hedge, and numerous instances of magical sleep; there are talking animals, or rather, animals that can talk to Rosie. There are whole passages that come, minus the muted beauty of McKinley's prose, straight from *Sleeping Beauty* variants — but the whole is greater than the parts, because McKinley is a master storyteller.

Have you ever wondered what the parents of a child fostered out immediately after birth must feel like? Have you wondered what it must be like to return such a child, when in every sense of the word you've been that child's parent? McKinley does. And she does this in a such a deft and gentle way you forget that you're reading a fairy tale.

Rosie is as memorable a character as either of McKinley's Beautys. Kattriona, one of the two fairies who shepherd her through the terrible risk of discovery, is just as good. There is plenty here that does surprise, all of it with McKinley's characteristic gentle-

ness, her obvious affection for the people she writes of—and writes for.

Don't miss *Spindle's End*. If you liked any of McKinley's work, and you have missed it, run to the nearest bookstore that has the taste and foresight to carry it, and grab it immediately. ♣



"Where exactly did you get the head?"

Back in the 1970s, Robert Thurston published several stories in our pages, including "Dream by Number" and "The Mars Ship." His novels include Alicia II, Q Colony, and a variety of movie tie-ins and Battletech books. During the past decade, his energies have been focused mostly on his work as an administrator and part-time humanities instructor at New Jersey City University, but he is finding time again to take us to the stars.

Slipshod, at the Edge of the Universe

By Robert Thurston

N SLIPSHOD, THE LARGEST of the asteroids at our edge of the universe, we set up a temporary camp. I guess "we" is inappropriate since I, as their prisoner, had nothing to do with the operation. With no atmosphere on Slipshod (the name given the asteroid by our exec officer, Elaine), we had to stay within the transparent dome. Actually, I did not have to stay within the dome. I could slip out and drift over the asteroid's surface. I had no need of atmosphere and was, by human definition, noncorporeal. Yet I could not waste energy reserves by going far. I had a substantial amount of reserve, but did not want to waste any in case a chance for a real escape came. And Slipshod was so plain and monotonous that scenic tours were out of the question.

Elaine traced her fingers along the surface of one of the screens in the computer where I was, by human definition, caged. As her fingers lingered on the screen, I sipped at her energy. At that moment I needed none of the human energy, but I could never resist absorbing some of it from this woman who was regarded as so beautiful among the others. In my own

sense of beauty, she is beautiful for the energy I absorb from her, an energy that, as it dissipates through my system, gives me a feeling like no other, like no other species I have absorbed from. Humans had the best reserves of energy I had ever experienced, and the most flavorful as well. And Elaine's was the energy I most craved. Truly, it was superior to the energy received from any of my own kind whom I have loved or killed in the elongated span of my existence.

Days ago, according to their measure of time, Elaine and Casey, the ship commander, discussed the mission just after making love in her quarters. During their peculiar expressions of passion, the heel of Elaine's foot had pressed briefly, and hard, against the screen of her room's computer terminal and, as a result, I was riding on a surge of energy that sent me bouncing from circuit to diode to cable and back again. At the time I paid little attention to what the two were saying, although like everything else I ever heard I remembered it later.

"I have serious misgivings," Casey said, his words coming out of his mouth in odd groupings, nothing like the rhythm of speech he normally employed.

"About what?" Elaine asked, as she rubbed his chest. Casey was muscular, according to the impressions of others that I picked up when I absorbed from the humans aboard the ship. (Muscularity, and for that matter, all corporeality drew my interest easily as a field of study.) The others regarded his face, however, as something less than beautiful, as they judged beauty. Elaine of course was the standard. She was beautiful, even with her face marred by its continual unhappiness, and Casey was not.

For a long while Casey lay with his eyes shut and steadied his breathing.

"Misgivings," Elaine prompted.

"Yes. About our goals. Our mission objective. The dark at the end of the tunnel."

"You're posing again."

"I have gotten through life this way. Don't stop me now. What I mean, Elaine, is that I always wanted my life to mean something."

"It does. You're a commander."

"Hollow triumph. I'm a commander who has never fought a major

battle, never made an impact on political structures, never discovered anything significant during years of exploring the backwater regions of the universe."

I could understand Casey because of the rare absorptions I had drawn from him, but I tended to avoid his energy unless I was in a low-level state.

Elaine again accused him of posing and for a short while he became more direct.

"This mission is a punishment. No, not a punishment — that would imply someone out to get me. I am not that important. No one is out to get me. I am just someone in the command structure, and a lower-echelon commander at that, who can be given a futile mission because there is nothing important for him to do anyway. What are we doing, when you come right down to it? Someone a thousand light-years away has theorized the location of the edge of the universe and so, as outsiders and therefore expendable, we are sent to the nearest point that the theory says it might be. If there is no edge to the universe, then the universe is infinite, as we have always comfortably believed, and we can go on forever looking for it. Talk about being shunted aside."

Elaine stayed quiet. I could imagine her thoughts, though. She did not really like Casey, and she thought his skills at making love were just another part of his posing, but she needed the feelings, the sensations that the act provided, and he tended to provide these sensations most efficiently. So she let him pose, both in speech and manner because, for the time being, he suited her, and of course there was not much opportunity aboard a small ship, many of whose inhabitants had been surgically altered to deny normal human urges. The higher command officers were allowed to refuse the alterations.

"If there is no edge to the universe," she finally said, "then we will prove it, and that will be that, and in its way that'll be your contribution. In the meantime, while we wait for it, touch me there. Ah, I feel that all through me."

I agreed with Elaine. Whether or not there was an edge to the universe, a physical measurable border where it all ended, did not matter to me. What I am particularly irritated about, as I review that conversation, is Casey's statement that he had made no significant discoveries. They had, after all, come to my planet, mapped it, communicated with us, and then

— in a peculiar and arrogant act of human assertion — had figured out a way to capture one of its beings — me — and store it in a computer to take it home for further study. By the time I had figured out how to bypass the netting of electrical impulses that had trapped me, their ship had carried me too far away from my planet to return. I do not know if I would have returned had there been an opportunity. This computer provides so many of the needs I had to struggle for at home that I find it quite relaxing. Besides, observing humans, or any other creatures, fascinates me. On our planet, we only had us.

The humans thought that snaring me was akin to imprisoning a ghost or pulling a being made of water out of an ocean, things that apparently human beings had accomplished in earlier expeditions in their history. History itself was a concept that I had struggled to understand. The whole idea of keeping a record of the past was anathema to me, and I suspected that, if my species had kept a history instead of an orally transmitted set of astonishing and ever-changing tales, our history would be longer than theirs but with less self-congratulation.

Now, according to every calculation and examination of physical data accomplished by the ship computer, we have reached the goal, the edge of the universe — surely, irretrievably, and all the other adverbs of certainty in the ingenious human lexicon. The absolute edge. On the other side of it was nothing. On this side of it were Slipshod and the last few asteroids on the way to the edge.

The concept of the edge of the universe meant little to me. I lived, for the time being, in the universe of this computer and it was a vast one. With its twistings and turnings, its loops and spirals, its way of curving back into itself, this was an infinite universe — as infinite as I needed, if that is not some sort of contradictory term. Humans worry about the convolutions and layered meanings of language, but I find them rich and abundant and representative of another kind of infinity, one which could occupy me forever. Humans call their good feelings happiness. That word is sufficient for me to describe the lack of resentment I feel at being separated from my own kind and imprisoned in this computer.

Sometimes I realized that I needed the humans for the surges and bursts of erratic energy that kept me going. I am, like them, finite and, if they die without transmitting me to a place where there are more of them,

I will die, too. Snap out of existence, and it won't matter. I can go on longer than they, since I have stored abundant reserves of their energy in the computer's dark places, enough energy to keep me going for a long period of their time, even after the computer itself fails. If I could absorb enough energy to leave them and go home across the void, I might try it. I have a good sense of where home is. It is mapped in their computer memory, and I can carry the information along with me — but I could only make it if I could count on encountering other beings, in other ships on their way to other places. The other way I could die is for the computer to be destroyed.

For now, though, we are on Slipshod, and with the humans I look out at the edge of the universe and try to see something more, some detail, some moving thing that would let us perceive what the other side of the universe was like.

"What are we looking for?" Casey said. "If we could see something out there, it would not be the edge of the universe. If the universe ends here, there can be nothing out there. Anything out there would just be an extension of our universe. I mean, even now, all we have are computer readings that indicate this is the edge along with an undeniably human fear to test it further."

The single foray the ship had made toward the edge had resulted in all the controls of the ship going haywire and forcing it to turn away and return to Slipshod.

"What about if this is not the absolute edge?" said Blackie, a crewman. Blackie was the physical opposite of Casey, small and unimpressive. "What about if this is the borderline with another universe? An edge, a border we can't cross, but another universe out there, existing separately?"

"If so, I hope it's better than this one," Elaine said, her voice strange, what the humans call distracted. "Another universe like this one would be a waste of time by whoever's building the universes."

"Multiverses," I said through the computer's audio system. Most of the crew were, as always, startled by one of my rare speaking intrusions. Either they forget me or do not, unlike Elaine, care to admit I am here, that I am, for good or ill, one of them, a crewmember, albeit undocketed. Apparently the reason they are uneasy with me is that I have no physical presence among them. "If where we are is a universe," I continued, "and there is another universe, then your God or Creator made multiverses."

"Is that so, what the spark-dog says, is that true, Casey?" Blackie asked. Blackie himself was never sure about anything and always asking others for verification.

"Semantics have never been my strong point," Casey responded. "Thing is, now that we have pretty much verified this is the edge of the universe, what do we do now?"

Elaine, whose warm hands on the computer surface had been transmitting some complicated and thrilling energy, abruptly walked away from the computer, toward Casey, and said: "We are here to be sure, to check further. I'll go. Let me go."

"Go where?" Casey asked.

"To the edge. *Through* it."

She now stood in front of him, her posture defiant.

"It's too risky," Casey said. "You might —"

"I might die, I might be repelled as the ship was and smash to my death on an asteroid surface, or dissipate into the void, be snuffed out of existence, turned into a giant cosmic turnip? I'm aware of all that. I accept the risk."

I did not like what I felt then, as I saw the possibility of her actual death and, with it, my own loss of her peculiarly exhilarating energy, so I interrupted again: "What you say is of the highest probability. You will simply die, which will prove nothing."

She whirled around, walked angrily toward the computer, bent her head a bit as if to talk into one of the speakers, as if it were my mouth if I had a mouth: "And so what, you bundle of — of whatever you are? What do you really know of human life? We are here to discover, explore, whatever. If we just make notes, enter data, turn around, go slinking back to let the theorists have their field day, what is proven? If somebody doesn't take the risk of going too far, then what is life worth?"

"I am not certain about what you call the 'worth of life.' It is not much a part of my culture. We believe we live forever somewhere, in some state, in some —"

"God," Casey said, his eyebrows raising abruptly and with the kind of dramatic look that Elaine called a *pose*, "spare us the religious crap of a being who is no more than sparks and radioactive dust particles."

"I was not referring to religion, as you understand it," I replied,

wishing I could place the emotional intonations and stresses into my speech the way Casey and Elaine did. "Religion is, for us, fact. We are not corporeal — therefore, we may speculate that we continue in some form. We cannot, we believe, be dissipated altogether."

I recalled their struggles to capture me and the further struggles to store me in this computer, efforts I never understood. The only reason I have discovered about why they needed to capture me is the expectation of profit from exhibiting me. Since I can only be detected and not seen, I am not sure how they planned to accomplish that.

Elaine stared at the computer for a long moment, then turned back toward Casey.

"Casey, give me the chance. I want to be footnoted in history for having tried, even if the note ends she was never seen or heard from again, okay? Okay?"

Casey glared at her, and the sense I received from him was genuine loneliness, the loss of her. But finally he nodded his head. "Sure, Elaine, go ahead with it. We'll load you down with recording equipment and bring that data home to the theorists, too. And, if you survive this, well, that'll shake them up good."

Elaine looked almost smug. I did not understand, could not understand.

"Foolish damn bravado, that's all it is," Blackie said angrily. "Suicide, you ask me. A wish to become nothing. I mean, if there's nothing on the other side, then that's what you'll be, nothing."

"Yes, but if it is indeed another universe, then...then we'll at least know."



WE WATCHED ELAINE sail toward the edge of the universe. She propelled herself toward it with thrusters attached to her suit, using the thrusters to give her a direct and quick line to the edge. Blackie watched nervously, his mouth twisted into the most negative look he could imagine — for whose audience, I wondered. Casey was not looking at him at all. Maybe Blackie was not as godless as he pretended. His sour expression may have been intended to register with his god.

Casey's face was anxious, worried. He fidgeted while he kept Elaine

in a fixed focus on various scanner screens. As he touched a screen, I was there to draw out bursts of his energy. He glanced down at his hand as if aware of my absorptions.

Elaine slowed as she neared the area which the computer had calculated as the edge itself. There was no sudden rejection of her, no throwing back, as there had been with the ship. Spreading her arms as if diving into water she plunged right toward the edge.

For a moment she seemed to disappear. There was an instant of what might have been optical illusion as parts of her appeared chopped off before passing through the edge. Finally, she was gone.

It seemed momentarily darker where she had gone through. Casey made a strange, choking sound followed by a faint whisper. Blackie closed his eyes.

Suddenly Elaine was on the other side, looking back toward us. I wondered if the calculations had been wrong. If she could be seen, whole and unchanged, perhaps she had not really gone through the edge, gone through anything. Perhaps she was in between worlds, in some kind of airlock between universes.

According to the computer's tracking, she had vanished. The records showed a blip of nothingness during her pass-through and continued to go on registering nothing. Apparently, wherever she was, it was beyond the universe we were in, beyond the edge, in some other place.

Elaine was Elaine for only a short while, less than half a minute. Her physical change was rapid, but it progressed through perceivable stages. She split apart, at first into aspects of herself. Her face floated in front of her head; her arms and legs were visible as separate entities of skin, bone, muscle, veins, arteries. Her pressure suit intermingled with parts of her and broke up into bits of itself, before dissolving. At one point her torso and hips exchanged places. There was something about children's toys in the computer's memory banks, and the first stage of Elaine's transformation reminded me of it.

The next stage was a transmutation of Elaine's individual parts. They sent out thin, sparkling rays of light as they changed texture, color, then rejoined in no human order — she was no longer head, body, limbs — no longer even recognizably human. If anything she was a casual geometric construction with no logic to it but a great deal of knobby and gnarly surface. Even with no face she seemed to stare at us.

This new entity lasted only a short time. It shifted and there was a new splitting apart — now she was small bits, fragments, of swirling light.

I sensed that the energy of her had grown, and I knew what I could do. I collected my energy reserves and eased out of the computer, passed through the wall of the dome, and into the vacuum of space. Crossing to the edge of the universe used up nearly all of the reserves, more than I had anticipated, and I knew I could not return to Slipshod. For a moment it looked as if I might snap out of existence before I reached the edge. But, even with the diminishing reserves, I felt more alive than I had since I had been captured and shoved into the computer.

I barely noticed my passing through the edge. The other side was still, with a sense of no distance, no dimension, no existence. But I did exist, and I was there. And Elaine was right in front of me, as swirling iotas of energy. Sensing her welcome, I joined with her. I changed, too. She became my energy, the energy I now needed, and I became hers. I was Elaine and she was I, and she was no longer Elaine and I was no longer I. Neither one of us wanted to return to the others or go to any home planet or go anywhere. She believed that our union was not sexual, and I saw that it had nothing to do with the accumulation of energy I had craved. There was something more and we did not know what it was. We thought we might find out. Or might not. We were where we were, and that is where we are.



Since it has been several years since a novel with Michael Bishop's name on it appeared (that being the unforgettable Brittle Innings), several inquiring minds have asked about his doings. Well, his recent projects include two mystery/crime novels cowritten with Paul Di Filippo under the nom de plume of Philip Lawson and a wonderful new collection of novellas entitled Blue Kansas Sky. And then there are gems like this one, which may not have a novel's breadth, but lacks none of the potency.

Her Chimpanion

By Michael Bishop

i.

SHE ORDERED A CHIMPANION from a Senegalese sidekick supplier and received it thirty-two days later. It flew steerage in a suborbital cargo craft, the *Rorqual*,

then maglevved to her over the mountains from Edmonton. Never having seen snow before, not even in hi-rez, it gazed about the white-epauletted shoulders of the coastal depot like a Georgia sodbuster manifesting on a cold escarpment of Olympus Mons.

ii.

Her Chimpanion manifested as a male, speaking a pidgin patois of English and French, in a belch-riven bonobo accent. She laid a finger to his trembling bottom lip and bought him a pair of ski pants. He answered to the name Valentin and wore the ski pants abashedly, hobbling beside her toward her pterolift like a shaggy James Whale hunchback.

iii.

Through the better part of a bitter year, Valentin afforded her Chimpanionship. As she spread-shot volume estimates of last summer's krill chill and the manifest attrition of dependent sea-going species, she could hear him swinging from the larder's caribou hook or pounding tattoos on ice-plugged water barrels. During breaks she begrudgingly groomed him. If he begged, she read to him, from Dr. Goose's *The Chimp with a Limp* or Goodall and Peterson's *Visions of Caliban*. Valentin, in turn, twirled a lock of her coal-black hair on a finger as purple as sunset.

iv.

In November he caught pneumonia. She feared that *his* sun would set. The virus did not respond to antibiotics, and to her surprise she found that an ape could sweat, manifestly at night, through both the buffer of his pelage and the icy acetate of his pajamas. Then something worked, a bitter pill with the corporate sobriquet Bonobax, and Valentin got better...only to succumb to viremia, an eruption in his heart of the original lung-monkeying virus, and she wept for his lost Chimpanionship, his calibanatic playfulness, maybe even his soul.

v.

The next time she ordered a sidekick, she insured it for a cool million creds, and specified a Penguin Pal.





FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

THE EXORCIST'S CHILDREN AND ROSEMARY'S YUPPIE

LIVING in Washington benefits anyone inclined to review films, because the Evergreen State's concession counters offer special candy designed to adjust the critic's IQ to a level appropriate to the film he or she has chosen to watch. Thus it was when I purchased a package of Junior Mints prior to exposing myself to the cinematic potentials of *Lost Souls*, I did so with the idea of lowering my analytic capacity to that of a mentally challenged person for whom English was a second language. Junior Mints is always my concession treat of choice when preparing to endure a film incorporating Satanic materials, and since according to my sources, *Souls* rivaled in quality *Bless the Child*, the *Battlefield Earth* of devil flicks, starring Kim Basinger, one of the worst actresses ever to win an Oscar, a list

headed by the late Barbra Streisand (I know, I know! Some say she still lives)...given all that, I proceeded to consume the entire box.

The patriarch of modern devil movies, *The Exorcist*, stands as a monumental achievement when compared to its skanky grandchildren, films such as the aforementioned *Bless the Child*, *End of Days*, and *Stigmata*. These films, populated by good buddy priests, wealthy Satanists, wise nuns, secret Vatican assault teams, and think tanks, are uniformly predictable and rife with logical flaws. Their protagonists are usually driven by a need for redemption, their villains by a lust for transcendence — in sum, their take on the religious impulse and the mysteries surrounding it is thoroughly simplistic. On the face of things, this is not necessarily bad. Formula movies — B movies — are a Hollywood staple. Indeed, with

multiple screenwriters scrubbing the individuality from almost every project (thirty-six, I'm told, worked on the execrable *Mission to Mars*), an industry-wide aesthetic funded by a marketing sensibility, and the sublimation of character and story to special effects and high concept (a notion best expressed by the punchline to an old joke: She's the Pope, he's a chimp — they're cops!)...With these verities in mind, it's apparent that the studios today are no longer geared to the making of good movies, but rather to the making of good B movies. Even by this standard, few films' treating of the Satanic can be said to have achieved any marked degree of competency, let alone B movie greatness, and fewer yet have made money domestically, though when dumped into the markets of Latin America and Roman Catholic Europe, they generally earn out. It seems odd that this is the case — you might suppose that the dark and richly complicated imagery of the Church would provide no end of inspiration, but then perhaps the very richness and complexity of the imagery overwhelms the instincts of those associated with these films, imposing upon directors and scripters a sense of creative inadequacy, and so they neglect the de-

tail work needed to create an entertaining variant of the Oldest Story, the battle between Good and Evil. Then again, perhaps they are merely incompetent. Or perhaps they fail to understand that Good and Evil are no longer compelling in and of themselves, at least not to the contemporary filmgoer, who appears to respond best to more human and/or comic expressions of the Ancient Struggle — testimony to this is the fact that of all recent devil flicks, only Adam Sandler's farce *Little Nicky* and *The Devil's Advocate*, which established the Big Red Guy as a lawyer, have made a consequential dent at the box office.

Judged in context of American films of the '70s, when it was initially released, *The Exorcist* comes across as little more than a serviceable entertainment. The ending falls a bit flat, and it's simply not that scary. But twenty-seven years later, re-released in a director's cut, its intelligence and craft put to shame today's carelessly constructed studio films. It is at heart a suspense movie, a genre forsaken by Hollywood of late (until M. Night Shyamalan came along). Though his best picture, *The French Connection*, was essentially a long chase, director William Friedkin knew

how to create suspense without pyrotechnics, and the interweaving of the stories of the three main characters projected against the gradual deterioration of the possessed child, Regan (Linda Blair), is handled wonderfully well. The first twenty minutes are a textbook example of the "show don't tell" ideal of filmic narration — no more than a few dozen words are spoken during the lengthy opening sequence that follows the exorcist Father Merrin (Max Von Sydow) on an archaeological dig in Iran, and as the other two main characters, Regan's mother (Ellen Burstyn) and the doubting priest Father Karras (Jason Miller), are introduced, there is little by way of hard exposition. The director's cut has some very good moments, particularly Regan's spiderwalk down the stairs of her home and an elaboration of the scenes during which she is treated in hospital, a horrific sequence that seems itself a kind of possession. But the quality that truly separates *The Exorcist* from its imitators is the absence of exposition throughout, the fact that Friedkin trusted his audience to follow relatively subtle cues, permitting them to draw upon their own experiences to flesh out the psychological template he had created, thereby in-

volving them all the more deeply in the tension of the film.

Which brings us to *Lost Souls*.

The Junior Mints had worked their magic, the theater darkened, and with dulled senses and lowered expectations, I was purely ready for some fly-eyed demons to get their slobbery-jawed, baby-liver-scarfing selves scragged by a basketball-playing priest and his hot nun sidekick, with maybe a couple of excellent impalements and spew scenes tossed in for good measure. You see, I love a good devil movie. I was raised up Roman Catholic in the South, and though most of the priests I'd known were nondescript, lumpish sorts who droned out the Mass with all the animation of Amtrak agents announcing departures, I continue to buy into the Church-sponsored myth that beneath those bulbous robes and fancy surplices lies the essence of Christ the Killer, ready to 187 any punk-ass demon what messes with his dogs. There's nothing short of my Aunt Paula's spoonbread that conjures up the easy satisfactions of childhood more poignantly than the sight of a backward-collar-wearing Godboy filing his crucifix to a point, then jamming it into the thorax of some miserable red-eyed, hairy-pawed Beelzebubba, who thereupon

lets out an Ozzy Osborne screech and disintegrates into a swarm of locusts.

The movie started off cool. Director Janusz Kaminski has a big rep as a cinematographer, and boy does he deserve it! I'd been of the mind that certain run-down sections of the Bronx were ugly, but under the right lighting and filters, I saw now that they retain a sense of old mysterious glories that reminds one of the crumbling palaces of Venice at twilight. To Kaminski's camera, rot is an earth tone, urban decay an autumn in Tuscany. Somewhere in the midst of all this fading splendor lies a seminary where beautiful-young-tragic Maya Larkin (Winona Ryder) has sequestered herself after being demonically possessed during her teenage years. One afternoon while watching children at play, Maya is visited by the exorcist and outlaw priest Father Lareaux (John Hurt), who asks her to accompany him to an exorcism. It's not made clear why Maya's presence is required. An exorcist groupie, maybe? I don't know. All she does during the event is pray and look freaked, which could be construed, I suppose, as symptomatic of arousal...at least in exorcist circles. Whatever, the subject of the exorcism, mathematics profes-

sor Noah Bergson (John Diehl), has been writing down page after page of numbers, and after the ritual goes badly, leaving Bergson unexorcized and Father Lareaux a broken man, Maya steals the professor's notes, decodes them, and declares that the person whose body will soon be used as a vessel for the anti-Christ so that He can rule over the earth forevermore and all that good stuff is a successful thirty-three-year-old true crime writer named Peter Kendell (Ben Chaplin). At this point Maya and Deacon John (Elias Koteas), an ally in Lareaux's struggles against the demonic...these two have a series of chats during which they explain pretty much everything that's going to happen in the rest of the movie. Which got sorta boring. I started thinking about other junk. Like you know, wouldn't having Maya around be something of a distraction to the young seminarians? You gotta figure there'd be a few crises of faith, a couple of guys coming up and asking if she'd care to see their rosaries. A missed opportunity here, I believe.

The one thing left unexplained by Deacon John and Maya is what's up with Peter Kendell, but Mister Scriptwriter doesn't leave us in the dark for long. All of Pete's friends,

his priest uncle (Phillip Baker Hall), and, it would appear, almost everyone on the Upper West Side has been conspiring without Pete's knowledge to groom him for the Anti-Christ gig. Painting secret pentacles under his bed, watching his back, and making sure he's successful, with bestsellers and a gorgeous (but evil) fiancée and an office that looks like the type of space Edward Scissorhands might choose to occupy during his Charles Dickens phase, a shadowy romantic clutter (more Kaminski visual magic!) full of creepy metal objects and buttery lamplight. This was all very much the same, I realized, as the scenario of *Rosemary's Baby*...except with a few exorcisms thrown in. Tell you the truth, I never did understand how come all the exorcisms were in this movie. They weren't really essential to the plot — though come to think of it, maybe they were there in place of a plot, because as mentioned the plot had been explained away. But they sure are fun to watch. Electronically distorted voices issuing from frail human throats, priest-tossing, steel doors bulging under infernal pressure, demon-cussin', big-eyed winonas in full-on soul sweat....

Yeah, uh-huh! Gimme some!
Against Maya's wishes (she

feels they should win the Ultimate Battle by means of goodness and niceness), Deacon John tries to assassinate Peter at a glitzy literary function, but hesitates beforehand to offer up a little speech, saying, "God will forgive me. The final transformation is near!", and this gives Peter's evil brother time to shoot him. Thereafter, Maya undertakes to demonstrate to Peter that his soul is about to be scooped out of the flesh in order to make room for the spirit of the Big Red Guy, and in doing so she explains everything again for the benefit of the folks in the audience who still don't understand what's happening — those handful of unfortunates lacking a central nervous system. I have to say that at this juncture either the Junior Mints were wearing off or else *Lost Souls* was so corrosively awful, it served as an effective anti-euphoric. The people around me, mainly teenagers neglecting their education for an afternoon to nourish, I assume, some nasty Columbine-ian impulse, were shifting in their seats and giggling. I dug for fragments in the bottom of the Junior Mints box. There was nearly an hour of *Lost Souls* left, and I was concerned I might have an adverse reaction to an unclouded perception of its process.

As the movie *kabanged sputter sputter cough kerchunked* toward its unnatural end, Maya and Peter engaged in a variety of meaningless action sequences, hunting down clues to the Ultimate Mystery that everyone in the audience had long since chewed up and digested. There was a scene in the dead deacon's house — rooms lit like Rembrandt's dark portraiture, linoleum patterns like Renaissance frescoes, water stains like exposed seams of some rare mineral (Ah, Kaminski!) — in which the still-possessed Professor Bergson appears and chases Maya with a big sharp pointy knife. Later, in a public bathroom that in its grungy grandeur must be described as Kaminski-esque, the toilets overflow with nightsoil and Bergson steps out of a previously unoccupied stall carrying, that's right, a big sharp pointy knife. (Bergson's propensity for popping up here and there is, like much else in the movie, never justified, and is one of the few elements that actually needed an explanation.) There's a scene in which Father Lareaux becomes possessed, is exorcised, and then warns Peter that he must find his uncle. Maya and Peter follow his advice, but it appears the good father was just spitballing, not offering enlightened

guidance, because they wind up in terrible danger and have to shoot their way out of a church filled with Peter's evil friends and then flee in his SUV. Can Peter be saved? 'Fraid not...not that anyone really gives a fig by this time. In the movie's final sequence, just as the digital clock in Pete's SUV changes from 4:55 to 6:66 (something similar happens in my SUV each time the electronics have to reset after a power outage), Maya shoots the Anti-Christ in the head with a small caliber pistol.

I think we're talking serious Anti-Climax.

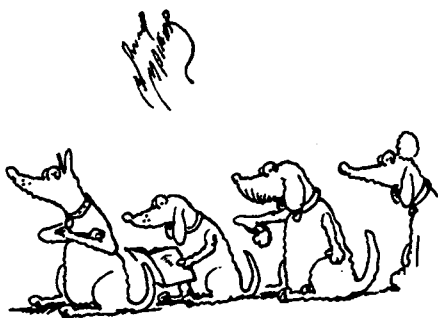
It's difficult to fathom why movies such as *Lost Souls*, *Bless the Child*, and *Stigmata* (a young woman is bodyslammed by invisible hands to heavy metal music for a couple of hours and bloody marks appear on her body) get greenlighted. Even considering the paucity of vision endemic among studio execs, you'd expect it would sink in after a while that the caca they're hurling is not sticking to the wall. Maybe Satan himself has taken a hand and contrived some hideous purpose for continuing this string of insipid abominations. Whatever the cause, there will surely be more. Upcoming devil projects include a flick about the Big Red Guy's ultra-evil wife, Satan on a space station, and

my personal favorite, a script in which a Vatican expedition to the Antarctic discovers the body of You Know Who frozen in a chunk of ice. The-fly-in-the-ice-cube joke made into a tale of Endless Evil.

In a better world the foundation laid by Friedkin would have been built upon, and we might have had devil movies that did not merely entertain, but also explored the nature of possession, both as to its many varieties and its roots in our human obsession — there could be actual value in such films. I remember when I was boy, and for some years thereafter, I spent a good deal of time trying to sneak up on myself. I'd be daydreaming or reading, doing something passive, and

I'd get the idea that if I were to cut my eyes quickly to the side and inward, if I acted without further thought, I might catch sight of myself. It seemed I held the belief that I was a creature of parts, that I shared my body with a twin who was not necessarily my ally. This may have been a symptom of pathology, but I rather think that many people have had more-or-less identical feelings during their childhood, and that these feelings have some relation to the pre-natal origins of the notion of possession. At any rate, that's what I wrote about when I came home after watching the director's cut of *The Exorcist*.

After watching *Lost Souls*, I wrote only this review. ☞



"You could always mention," replies Ms. Friesner to our inquiry, "that my husband Walter has an extensive frog collection and is thus partially to blame for this story."

"Live frogs or stuffed?"

"Now THERE is a question you don't expect to see every day," says the witty fantasist. "Or any day, for that matter."

Hats off to Walter and his collection of objets d'frog for inspiring this story that reminds us that boys will be boys and frogs will be frogs.

Warts and All

By Esther M. Friesner

THE BETROTHAL RECEPTION was going swimmingly until the princess started spouting frogs. The attack came with no warning, at precisely the critical moment in the ceremonies when the archbishop called upon the royal lady to declare her freewill consent to the marriage. Princess Eudisia blushed prettily, gave her barbarian groom-to-be a languishing look from beneath plush black lashes, smiled, and said, "I swear by all holy that I enter into this union willingly."

Her words emerged half-smothered by a stream of brown and green froglings, most no bigger than a child's littlest finger (though one or two did top the scales at the mass of an apricot). The crowd gasped, the archbishop staggered back, the princess stared and swooned, her silver-powdered wig lurching to an awkward angle as she fell, and even Prince Feodor of the Frozen Wastes, who had once saved his father's entire kingdom by slaying an ice-dragon singlehanded, went pale. Only the princess's younger brother, Prince Goffredo, seemed pleased by this turn of events. He snatched a golden goblet from the waiting banquet table and

flung himself forward with an unregal whoop, obviously bent on scooping up as many of the fugitive frogs as possible.

The festivities went to pot in short order: Prince Feodor and his entourage retired to their chambers in confusion, shedding wisps of sable and ermine in their wake; the archbishop alternately thundered and mumbled about the social and ecclesiastical irregularities which the princess's amphibious outburst had occasioned; the nobility buzzed and chattered amongst themselves, sucking every bit of sweetness from this toothsome newborn scandal; the servants shrieked and fled or stood their ground and giggled. To cap it all, in the heat of the hunt Prince Goffredo misjudged his distance and stepped squarely onto one of the frogs, which squished beneath his heel and sent him skidding across the marble floor into the backside of the Lord Chancellor, who promptly fell into a minor apoplexy and had to be given salts.

From her proper place upon the throne of her forefathers, Queen Annunziata sat observing all, frozen into the deathly stillness of a cobra contemplating its next strike. Her lily-white hands, frosted with diamonds, clutched the folds of her blue satin gown with a falcon's grip. Face aflame, she thrust herself to her feet and roared, "Be quiet, all of you! You act as though my daughter spewed up those hideous creatures on purpose! Are you too blind to know an evil spell when you see one? I should have your heads removed from your shoulders for such insolence! By God, I will!"

"Mercy, Your Majesty!" the Archbishop cried, his hand rising to shield his throat from the threat of the executioner's axe. "I never meant to imply — "

"Begone! Out of my sight! You useless boobies, clear this hall now!" The queen snatched up the orb of state and flung it at the heads of the assembled nobility, scattering them like chickens. "Convey the princess to her rooms and see to her comfort. Summon my physicians and my wizard to minister to her. Seal up the palace, that the agent of this perfidious attack may not escape my just and terrible vengeance. And for the love of heaven, Freddie, put *down* those frogs!"

"But Mummy — " Prince Goffredo began.

"Not another word. Ugh! Horrid, slimy, pop-eyed things. I don't see how you can bear to touch them. Well?" (This last word was addressed to

the gorgeously appareled crowd still milling about in the grand salon.) "What are you waiting for? Individual death sentences? That can be arranged."

Some queens owned reputations for beauty, some for grace, some for the fineness of their needlework. Queen Annunziata's reputation was based solely on the ferocity of her temper and the ghastly fates that had befallen those rash enough to dally in her presence when the fury took her. The prince's governess whisked him away, the princess's ladies-in-waiting waited not, but bore her to her chambers posthaste, leaving her wig behind, and the rest of the hall emptied itself in record time, until only the queen herself and one other person remained.

"My dear?" A mild voice from the second, lesser throne echoed strangely among the crystal chandeliers illuminating the deserted room. "My dear, surely you didn't mean those awful things you said?"

The queen, still breathing hard from her recent eruption, turned slowly to face her beloved consort, King Verran. He was a small man, as delicately made as the queen was strapping, with large, tawny eyes and a wide, expressive mouth that was presently downturned and quivering.

"About the death sentences?" she asked. "I most certainly —"

"No, about the frogs."

"Oh!" The queen's face melted from the stony mask of rage to the tender expression of a lovesick maiden. She flung herself at her husband's feet and clasped his knobby knees. "Forgive me, my beloved, I forgot. You know I never felt that way about you."

King Verran smiled faintly and stroked his wife's cheek. "Of course not, my love; I know. But it does still hurt to hear you speak so of my people."

The queen's contrition vanished like a snuffed flame. "They are *not* your people," she maintained. "They never were. You know the story as well as any man: You were a prince who was bewitched into frog shape until my kiss freed you, allowing you to resume your proper form."

"Now, now, Nuni," Verran said, invoking the pet name that no man since her father had ever dared use. "Aren't we both a little old for fairy tales?"

Annunziata pressed her lips together until her mouth resembled his. "It's *not* a fairy tale; it's what really happened! More or less. In all the years

of our marriage, has even one of my subjects ever claimed that *wasn't* the way of it?"

"Yes," said Verran. "Me."

"Faugh! Twenty years, Verran; twenty long years and two children and *still* you cling to that untenable delusion! Can't you let it die?"

The king's face fell. "Precious lady, how can you still hold fast to a lie, even one of your own making? How, especially now? The day I have so long dreaded is upon us. No delusion, however soothing, can prevent it. Our darling daughter's affliction is but the harbinger of worse to come."

"Stuff and nonsense. Much as I love you, I refuse to cosset your fancies. Next thing you know, all of the old rumors will be flying through the palace again, and then what? It wasn't so bad the first time, after we were newly wed, but now? The children will hear. Worse, Prince Feodor and his party will get wind of it, and they're barbarians: They'll believe anything. If they believe *this*, they'll pull out of the marriage, which means an end to the alliance, which means our borders will be left as ill-protected as before. These warriors of the Frozen Wastes delight in mayhem and slaughter. They imagine that to die sword-in-hand — even in a foolish fight — assures them a place in heaven. They're not just expendable, they're champing at the bit to be expended; *perfect* border guards! Prince Feodor's bride-price for our daughter includes three legions of his finest men-at-arms for me to deploy as I like. I'm not going to let anything spoil *that*."

"Not even the truth?" King Verran asked softly.

"They were *flowers*." The queen spoke as though her husband had not said a word. "Princess Eudisia was so overwhelmed with joy at the thought of wedding Prince Feodor that when the moment came to give her consent to the marriage, her words emerged as *flowers*. Everyone saw it; we have a multitude of witnesses. We may also have one or two traitors who will swear they saw frogs spring from our child's lips, but we know how to deal with traitors. Yes, that's it: *Flowers*." She seized her husband by the arm and hauled him away to begin placing her version of the day's events in the proper ears and on the proper tongues.

The wedding day of Princess Eudisia dawned clear and warm, splendid May weather. The princess herself looked even more ravishing than

the dawn, a vision in white silk shot with silver, swaths of pink tulle festooning the wide panniers supporting her skirt. With her towering wig of ice-blue hair curiously interwoven with strands of priceless pearls she seemed like an exquisite porcelain doll. (Although one catty duchess remarked that Eudisia more nearly resembled a dinner bell, and that it was a lucky thing that the last giant in her mother's kingdom had perished three generations ago, else he might have picked her up by the neck and shaken her, just to hear her chime.)

The ceremony was to take place in the great cathedral whose rosy stone towers needled the air at the foot of the mountain where the royal palace perched. For a week or more the city streets had bubbled and seethed with a froth of humanity in a hurry: Craftsmen, merchants, cooks, and all the rest of the canny suckerfish that swam in the shadow of the wedding's dignified progress. Seamstresses and their assistants scurried from one aristocratic townhouse to another, butlers fought duels before the doors of a dozen vintners in order to lay claim to the finest wines for their masters' tables, precious cartloads of sugar intended for cakes and sweetmeats were hijacked from the queen's highway, under the very noses of well-bribed guards, and a man could name his own price for marzipan.

Throughout it all, the princess remained shut up in her rooms, her lips tightly sealed. It was no use speaking to her politely, requesting as little as a single word: She was mum, and mum she stayed. Her ladies-in-waiting shrugged off her obstinate silence and resolved to make the best of this unanticipated holiday from Eudisia's former nonstop stream of commands and complaints. Prince Goffredo took full advantage of his sister's self-imposed reticence and haunted her chambers, calling her all sorts of names, until she dealt with the problem by flinging shoes at his head.

By the wedding morn she was quite out of shoes. The prince was nimble, and managed to snatch each missile from midair, spiriting them away in twos and threes. The ladies-in-waiting discovered the end result of this fraternal squabble when they went to the princess's wardrobe and found it empty of all footwear save a single silver slipper, half of the bridal shoes.

Clearly this was an emergency, and after a furious wrangle concerning

who should be the unlucky woman sent to fetch the queen, Annunziata was notified. She burst into her daughter's suite still in her negligée, white-streaked auburn tresses tumbled any which way about her shoulders.

"What's all this?" she demanded, sweeping down upon her daughter. The ladies-in-waiting scattered to the four quarters, leaving mother and child alone. "Is it true? You've not said a single word since the betrothal? Not one? Not to a soul?"

Eudisia nodded and rubbed one silk-stockinged foot against the other, a nervous habit left over from a stressful childhood. The unwonted friction caused the fragile fabric to tear, sending a ladder running up the princess's left leg from ankle to knee. Healthy pink flesh showed through the snowy silk like a scar. Eudisia bowed her head and would not meet her mother's eyes.

"Ridiculous," Annunziata spat. "You're afraid of the fro — of the flowers falling from your mouth again, aren't you?" Once more the princess nodded. "Of all things! You're as bad as your father when it comes to foolish fancies. Where is your backbone?"

Eudisia shrugged. This reply did not satisfy her mother at all. "My daughter, a coward. Who would have thought it possible? Worse than that, an uncounseled coward. *Think, girl!*" The queen's hand seized Eudisia's little bonbon of a chin and forced her to look up from her lap. "If you don't speak now, when you are safe in the privacy of your own rooms, how can you tell whether or not the spell is still upon you? You can't. And in that case, how were you planning to deal with the wedding? You *must* speak then, to make your vows; there's no escaping it."

Eudisia jerked her chin free of Annunziata's grasp, then reached for the crayon and the dainty, brocade-covered notebook resting on the taboret by her chair. Since the initiation of her silence she had relied upon the written word to express any desires too complex for simple gestures to communicate. Although her ladies-in-waiting did their discreet best to purloin the notebook, lest the bad old days of nonstop royal whim return, the princess always managed to come up with a fresh one.

Now Eudisia set point to paper and wrote: *Can't we tell the archbishop that I have laryngitis?*

"We could," her mother replied. "And then he would order the

wedding postponed until your recovery. My child, the law is clear, and since it is church law, it binds us all: No one may be wed until witnesses have heard consent voluntarily given."

What about when mutes marry? Eudosia scribbled.

"I doubt I could find two people in all my lands stupid enough to believe you have suddenly become a mute. Even so, have you forgotten the stipulations governing your acceptance as Prince Feodor's bride? I doubt it. You went through enough inspections at the hands of countless physicians and midwives before the contract was signed; by now the terms must be embroidered on your brain: None may rule nor wed the ruler of the Frozen Wastes unless unflawed, sound in both mind and body. Claim muteness and kiss your prince good-bye!"

Eudosia frowned and wrote furiously: *And I suppose that spewing frogs doesn't count as a physical flaw?*

The queen looked grim. "None of your backchat, my girl; we're both on the same side in this battle. Even the barbarians of the Frozen Wastes know an evil enchantment when they see one. Now hark: You're going to go to your wedding and you will give the proper response to the archbishop when the time comes. At best we may discover that your former plight was a passing inconvenience, like a bad case of wind at a state dinner. At worst you will still find a frog or two at your feet when you've done speaking, but you'll also find a husband in your power. Burst into tears at once and throw yourself into Feodor's arms, imploring him, for his honor's sake, to hunt down and discover the fiend responsible for your affliction. *For his honor's sake*, mind! So public a plea, couched in such terms, will leave him unable to do less than undertake a quest on the spot."

For the first time since the débacle at her betrothal rites, the princess looked hopeful. Venturing a smile, she jotted: *If my prince goes on quest, what about the honeymoon?*

"You liquorish jade! How can you think of that at a time like this? Do you want to be my death? First we get Prince Feodor's men in place, preventing the invasion of my borders, *then* we worry about him invading yours." Annunziata gave the princess a box on the ear, but a mild one, so as not to set her wig a-tilt, and dragged her off in search of Prince Goffredo and her other shoe.

Everyone inside the cathedral who was in a position to view the high altar clearly said that the princess was obviously in love with her groom. There was no other way to explain the radiant look that overspread her face — a passionate blush that invaded the bride's cheeks despite their fashionable layers of powder and paint — as soon as she spoke the words *I do consent to it*. Countesses and duchesses alike dabbed at their eyes with wispy lace handkerchiefs to see Romance unveil its presence at what was previously thought a purely political match.

"This reminds me of her mother's wedding," the old Duchess of Belarminio wheezed into her daughter-in-law's ear. "I never again thought to see a highborn couple so besotted with one another as Annunziata and Verran."

"Charming," Lady Petronilla gritted in reply, her bitterness perhaps stemming from thoughts of her own marriage, an alliance of lucre, not love.

"Oh, hush," the duchess snapped, knowing full well whence her daughter-in-law's thoughts tended. She rapped Petronilla's knuckles with her folded fan. "It's not as if he wears the milkmaid's dress to bed *every* night."

On the altar dais, Queen Annunziata and Princess Eudisia exchanged glowing smiles. The wedding vows had been spoken and not so much as a tadpole had reared its ugly head. The queen was as relieved as her daughter, but her relief was tempered by a nagging doubt: Where *had* the frogs gone? Despite her assurances to Eudisia, Annunziata was too experienced in the ways of the world to accept this happy turn of events *per se*. Evil spells were not like a bad cold or a mild abrasion or an unwanted visit from unpleasant relatives: They did not simply go away if given enough time.

We're not out of the woods yet; I feel it in my bones, she thought, watching the exchange of rings and the bridal kiss. *Something irksome this way comes*.

Though her heart quaked, she kept her smile firmly in place and gratefully drank in the crowd's acclaim when the archbishop presented them with the newly wed couple. Beside her, King Verran tossed court protocol to the winds and embraced his wife with the same joy that had always attended all aspects of their married life.

"It's over," he whispered. "What a burden's been lifted from my

shoulders! Oh, I just knew she would relent. After all, it's been some twenty years. Even *she* couldn't carry a grudge that long without feeling a little silly."

"My dearest, what *are* you talking about?" the queen asked. She quickly got an answer, though not from him.

A piercing scream rang out beneath the vaulted ceiling of the great cathedral. The priceless glass goblet which had been the archbishop's gift to the newlyweds, and which he had just offered to the princess as a loving cup, lay shattered at the foot of the altar steps, bleeding wine. In the midst of shards and splatters sat a frog.

"It was in the cup!" Princess Eudisia shrieked, pointing at the indifferent creature. "I raised it to my lips and came face-to-face with that — that — *thing!*"

"Fear not, wife." Prince Feodor patted his bride's cheek. "I have slain ice-dragon. This is nothing." Chuckling like a bear in a berry patch, he strode down the steps in a sweep of fur robes and stomped the frog to paste with one blow.

A dramatic crash of thunder shook the cathedral, followed by an anomalous ripple of ethereal music, invisible flutes and harps tuned to such a pitch as to cause the listeners to grit their teeth and shiver while cascades of oversweet notes caused sugar crystals to form in their ears. Prince Feodor retreated to the altar heights, nervously trying to shake away rivulets of daisy petals trickling from his sleeves. The multicolored shafts of sunlight coming in through the stained glass windows all turned the pale pink of infant rosebuds and a gauze-winged being came drifting up the aisle through the syrupy light.

She was no taller than a child of six and she came richly attired in a gown with the puffed sleeves and gold brocade stomacher of a previous generation. The circlet of diamonds adorning her frosty hair might not have purchased all of Annunziata's kingdom, but it would have been sufficient as a down payment. Her glass-slipped feet hovered a royal yard above the white bridal carpet gracing the aisle as she sailed along. It seemed as though she would fly all the way up to the altar, but she stopped at the foot of the steps. In her right hand she held a wand — also glass — from whose tip leaped a fountain of blue sparkles. Its brilliance only served to emphasize the fact that she cast no shadow.

In her left hand she held a frog.

"Good heavens!" King Verran gasped. "It's my wife!"

"What?" The force of Annunziata's exclamation nearly extinguished the fairy's wand.

"You mean you never told her?" The fairy smirked.

Queen Annunziata maintained a private mental list of many things which she did not readily endure. People whose self-satisfaction outstripped her own rode high on it, and that included fairies. Whatever ugly fact lay behind her consort's incriminating utterance was immaterial: She would not be publicly humiliated by anyone, mortal or fey, truth be damned.

"You can wipe that smug look off your whey-face right now, you overblown dragonfly," she snapped. "I've known everything I need to know about my Verran for years, and one thing I am sure of is that he was never fool enough to wed one of the Fey! He was a frog when I found him, an enchanted prince suffering under the spell of a wicked witch. I freed him with a single kiss and we were wed at once: Any pig-boy or goose-girl for seven kingdoms around can tell you that. We were living happily ever after until some people I could mention had the bad manners to appear at our daughter's wedding uninvited. Where were you brought up? Under a mushroom?"

Before the fairy could answer, fresh inspiration struck the queen. "I see it all now: You're the one to blame for my darling Eudisia's unhappy affliction at her betrothal."

"You call it an affliction; we call it fair warning," the fairy said with a malicious little smile. "Rather like a calling card."

Annunziata snorted. "You're probably also responsible for making dear Verran spew twaddle about having any other wife but me. Lies or frogs, you wand-wigglers can put anything in an innocent body's mouth, can't you? His wife! Oh, *that's* a rich one!" Her contempt could have leveled cities.

The royal wizard hurried to the foot of the altar steps, placing himself between the fairy and the bridal party. Even if his queen were too carried away by her own wrath to remember caution, he was not. He remembered how ill-advised it always proved for mortals to affront the powers of Faerie. A flourish of his ashwood staff and a luminous cage of warding

spells dropped over himself and all members of the royal family. It melted into individual shells of shielding that clung like a second skin to those selected for protection.

His bread-and-butter thus secured, the wizard turned his attention to the fairy. "Puissant lady," he said, bowing low. "Vouchsafe us, I prithee, some cause for this, thy untoward accusations against our revered King Consort, Verran. Whence thine epithalamic pretensions?"

The fairy and the frog in her hand alike blinked slowly at the wizard, one face as empty of comprehension as the other.

"Wizards...", The queen sighed. "He means why are you standing — floating there, lying like a tinker about your being Verran's wife?"

"His wife? I?" said the fairy. "As if I would breed with the likes of him! I am the lady Asphodel, highborn of the most pureblood house of Faerie, and I'd sooner mate with a maypole."

"Who wouldn't?" murmured the frog. A great gasp went up from the wedding guests to hear human speech issue from its mouth. "You mistook your consort's words, O queen: When he said 'It's my wife,' he meant me."

The frog leaped from the lady Asphodel's hand. No sooner did she touch the floor than she sprouted up to human size, a transformation accompanied by such an incandescent aura that Annunziata assumed (quite correctly) that the fairy had a hand in it somewhere.

"You knew this day would come, Verran," the frog said, turning her head so that the king's face was mirrored in one of her enormous eyes.

"I knew. Oh yes, I knew!" The king wrung his hands in sorrow. Turning to Annunziata he said, "I tried to tell you, my love. I did my best to warn you, but you refused to listen. You would insist on the story going the way you'd always heard it told."

"Naturally." Regardless of present circumstances, Annunziata retained her self-assurance. "Your version of the tale was too preposterous: A spell that's begun, not broken, by a kiss? A frog who turns into a prince when he never was a prince in the first place? Absurd!"

"The truth is often absurd," the frog said. "However, you may set your mind at ease on one point: Verran always was a prince; a frog-prince in the simplest sense of the word."

"My father ruled the Eldritch Marshes," Verran said miserably. "He was rather hot-tempered, for a cold-blooded creature, and once gave

mortal insult to a dark enchantress when I was but a tad. She struck back at him by cursing me on my wedding day."

"Our wedding day," the giant she-frog prompted. "I remember it well. They were just serving the stuffed caterpillars at our nuptial feast when the wizardess appeared, awful in her robes of flame. She aimed her staff of power at my beloved and said, 'O lissome leaper, let your lips now bear the liability for thy royal sire's loose-tongued libels. Frog-prince, you'll tadpole-like transform to human shape if e'er your mouth meets that of any save your bride, nor shall you to your proper form return until your lips touch hers willingly once more.'" She took a deep breath, then added: "There was more, but it was fairly standard stuff, the general guidelines governing such malisons, and all in Latin."

"A quaint curse from a whimsical wizardess, wouldn't you say?" Annunziata remarked. She turned to her husband. "And did you know the full terms of her spell on that April morn when you hailed me from your lily pad, begging for a kiss? Did you deliberately mislead me, Verran?"

The king blushed. "As soon as she pronounced her dreadful malediction, the evil one snatched me up in a whirlwind and bore me far from my kingdom, dropping me on my head in your father's goldfish pond. The first thing I saw when the stars stopped spiraling before my eyes was you. I remember thinking how lovely you looked. Your beauty drove every other thought from my mind, including the thought of how silly it was for a frog to fall in love at first sight with a human girl. All I knew was that I would die if you didn't kiss me. It was only afterward that my memories returned — all of them." He gave the frog a sidewise look and bowed his head, abashed. "But I never lied to you, Annunziata. I told you I was a prince under a spell, and so I was."

"He's that and more," the giant frog added. "As my lawful spouse he's likewise co-regnant over my patrimony, the Realm Amphibious. For too long have I sat upon a widowed throne. At last I come to reclaim what is mine. Give me my husband and my king, O ill-counseled mortal woman! Surrender Verran or face the consequences!"

Queen Annunziata was unmoved by these amphibian histrionics. Cool as a mud puppy's posterior, she ambled slowly down from the high altar to where frog and fairy waited. She paced slowly around the giant

frog, observing her from every angle before she said: "I first kissed Verran some twenty years ago, Madam Mugwort, and you've only now come to claim him?"

"My name is Esmeralda, Madam Mortal, and I am every inch as much a queen as you," the frog replied coldly.

"Not so many inches, though, when it comes down to cases," Annunziata said with a derisive grin.

Queen Esmeralda waved away her rival's sally with a flick of her webbed forefoot. "If I have tarried long in my arrival, it is because the Eldritch Marshes lie beyond the borders of the Frozen Wastes, and the Realm Amphibious even farther away than that. Do you know how long it takes to traverse so much territory when all you can do is hop?"

"If not for Queen Esmeralda's pact with my own liege lord and lady, she would even now still be on the road," the fairy Asphodel said. "But the royal froggy folk have entered into treaty with the lords of Faerie, they giving us their vassals to pull our walnut-shell coaches, we to fly their rulers wherever they desire. When she reached the borders of the Forest Precarious, on the northern edge of the Frozen Wastes, I intercepted her and brought her hither."

No one had noticed, what with all the to-do before the altar steps, but Prince Goffredo had slipped down the shadowed side of that marble stairway and now sidled up to the hovering fairy. He tugged gently at her butterfly wings and in his treble voice inquired, "If you can fly, why do you need to ride around in frog-drawn coaches?"

Asphodel scowled down at him, her fingers playing over the stem of her wand. Horrid energies of magic coiled around the slender shaft like snakes, ready to leap forth against the impertinent boy. They fizzled away only when she saw the residual glimmer of the wizard's warding spell still clinging to the prince. A false smile replaced her scowl and she replied, "It's protocol, child. You are too young to understand."

"That's what Mummy said when I asked her why Dodo has to marry Prince Feodor," Goffredo told her. "I told her that I didn't like him, that he looked like an old bear and smelled like a herd of goats, but Mummy told me she'd wed Dodo to a bear *and* a goat together if it were for the good of the kingdom."

A gasp arose from virtually every throat, a gasp followed by a silence

deeper than the ocean's icy heart. The delegation from the Frozen Wastes bristled like a nest of porcupines.

"That will be quite enough out of you, Freddie," Queen Annunziata said crisply, her cheeks awash in blushes. She gave the crown prince a brisk slap on the royal throne-warmer to encourage a swift return to his father's side.

"Prince Feodor, I assure you — " Verran began, his own cheeks colored with chagrin.

"Behold the payment for this, your vile adultery!" the fairy cried, swooping her wand in exultant figure-eights. "Thus always shall doom befall those who affront the allies of the Fey! This insult will bring war between this accursed realm and the Frozen Wastes, and Queen Esmeralda's slighted honor will be avenged."

She might have had more to say on the subject, but her words were blotted out by Prince Feodor's blustery laughter. The barbarian prince, the bare-handed slayer of the ice-dragon, stood doubled over, his burly body shaking with deep, full-chested guffaws.

"Might I inquire what you find so funny?" Asphodel asked, miffed in the extreme.

"You," Prince Feodor replied between diminishing eruptions of snickers. "You think Prince Goffredo says something we don't know, makes trouble, brings war? Princess *knows* why she marries me: Same reason I wed her! My father's Council makes the match, to get our kingdom seaport gateway to the southlands. For this, they too would wed me to a goat, to a bear — ha! Even to *you*! You think I throw away rich trade treaty so easy? You think we go to war for a *frog*?"

The fairy's ivory brow had taken on the aspect of a thunderhead. "Insolence! For this you will suffer, O prince. Nay — " A sly smile lit her eyes. " — for this you suffer already."

Her wand described a circle in the air above her head. It sizzled with sparks of silver and gold, then filled with a milky curtain of mist. Everyone in the cathedral looked up as the mists parted to disclose a vision.

Prince Feodor and the men of the Frozen Wastes sucked breath between their teeth, transfixed by horror. The glimmering blue and orange onion domes, the opulent palaces, the frozen spiderweb bridges and broad promenades of their kingdom's sumptuous capital were drenched with

frogs. Pleasure gardens yielded up bouquets of batrachians, women fled shrieking through the streets, swathed from scalp to soles in spring peepers. Warriors waded through the morass of squirming, croaking, leaping creatures, struggling to maintain their balance as their boots churned up a slick mass of crushed amphibians underfoot that was both dangerous and disgusting. Cleanup crews labored in vain, doing their best to scoop up the slippery invaders in kegs and barrels and bushel baskets. They loaded these into carts, but the plethora of frogs still on the loose spooked the oxen into a stampede, adding to the chaos in the streets.

"Enough!" Prince Feodor cried, averting his gaze just as a whole company of horsemen at the gallop skidded on a thick patch of squashed frogs and went crashing through the doors of the Ministry of Conquest. "Evil spirit, why this happens to my people?"

"Because *your* people have become *her* people," the lady Asphodel replied with a wicked little laugh. She pointed her wand at Queen Annunziata as the swirling visions overhead dispersed into clear air. "Those leaping legions you saw are the frog-queen's armies. Their progress is slow, but devastating. I advise you, O stealer of husbands, to reach a peaceable accord with Queen Esmeralda before they get here. You have seen what despoliation they cause in Prince Feodor's realm, only because the Frozen Wastes have the misfortune to lie across their line of march. What damage they effect there is offhand havoc, purely accidental. You don't want to see what they can do when they *intend* to destroy things."

Queen Annunziata glowered at the fairy. "You misjudge me, Madam," she replied. "Perhaps I do want to test the mettle of my troops against yon hordes of hopping cannon fodder. Let them come and do their worst, for I vow by this gold betrothal ring which has adorned my finger lo, these twenty years, I shall not give up my husband! Now if you will excuse me, I have a wedding banquet to attend. You are *not* invited." So saying, she swept out through one of the doors behind the altar.

Most of the royal entourage followed her. The congregation of nobility took the cue to find their own escape routes, streaming from the cathedral with tongues wagging at a furious rate over all that they had witnessed. By the time the rose-and-lavender-scented dust settled, there was no one left before the high altar save the frog, the fairy, and the king.

"I'm very sorry, ladies," said King Verran, looking sheepish. "My Nuni does have a bit of a temper. She doesn't care for ultimatums; they provoke her."

The fairy's lip curled. "Your...Nuni would be better advised to swallow her pride before we swallow her kingdom. Or do you fancy the thought of seeing your adoptive people die of thirst and starvation?"

"She speaks the truth, Verran," Queen Esmeralda said. "Once my armies get here, they will overrun the crops, drink dry the rivers. Fields will yield no harvest but frogs, wells will be choked by squadrons of suicidal polliwogs."

"Your roads too will be rendered useless," Asphodel spoke up again. "Runner and rider both will find no footing. Commerce will cease. Villages will be isolated islands of humanity in a vast, surging, hopping, croaking sea."

"Oh dear," said Verran. He looked upset, but not sufficiently so to satisfy the fairy, who liked watching mortals squirm.

"Is *that* all you can say?" she demanded. "'Oh dear'? Perhaps you imagine your royal wizard has a spell or two that may save the day?"

"Well, I did rather hope that he might," Verran replied. "He's a very good wizard."

"Put it from your mind," the fairy said imperiously. "Magic is mighty, but a cause steeped in justice shatters any spell hurled against it. The blood of Queen Esmeralda's kindred has been shed here this day, and by a member of Annunziata's royal house. It cries for vengeance!"

"Blood? What blood?" Verran asked, bewildered. Then it dawned on him: "Ohhhh." He glanced from the remnants of the shattered goblet at the foot of the altar steps, to the smear which Feodor had made of the unfortunate frogling within it, to Esmeralda. "One of your siblings, my dear?"

"My brother," Queen Esmeralda said, her voice breaking with emotion.

"Well, it's not as if you haven't got more to spare," Verran offered. "It's been twenty years, but as I recall it, our people don't give birth so much as we squirt out multitudes."

The fairy made an impatient sound. "What matters it whether he was only one of an innumerable jellied generation? He was still the queen's

brother! The moral principle's the same, and his death gives us the excuse we need to wreak a terrible revenge upon this kingdom."

"Or not," said the frog queen. She gazed at Verran meaningly.

THE QUEEN was seated at the head of the banquet table, fêting her daughter's marriage, when one of the archbishop's servants brought her Verran's letter of farewell. She read it, rose to her feet, crushed the closely written pages to her bosom, and flew into a passion of weeping.

This was most awkward. Those members of the nobility highborn enough to merit an invitation to the queen's own table didn't know what to do or even where to look. The princess Eudisia, seated at Annunziata's right hand, threw her arms around her mother's waist and attempted to pull her back into her chair, begging her to disclose the reason for her grief. Prince Goffredo was seated prudently apart from the other feasters at a table peopled by his playmates, little boys all as boisterous and unbiddable as they were blueblooded, but on seeing his mother's anguish he too ran over to embrace her and ask her why she cried.

Thus beset and petitioned, the queen stanchd her tears, shoed Freddie back to the children's table, and revealed the contents of the letter to all present. "Is there no end to the nobility of that man, nor to the perfidy of frogs and fairies?" she demanded. "To spare this kingdom from a plague of those insidious creatures, he sacrifices all! Oh Verran, Verran, my heart is broken! How am I to go on living without you?"

"Could abdicate," Prince Feodor suggested.

Annunziata's tears stopped short. She shot her son-in-law a nasty glare. "No one asked you," she said coldly. "And if I were fool enough to give up my throne, your wife wouldn't be the next in line to get it. Goffredo would be king."

Prince Feodor shrugged philosophically. Annunziata did a silent evaluation of the northern prince's ambition, strength, and ruthlessness versus Freddie's tender years and vulnerability, and made a mental note to double the guards on her boy-child's door.

"Whatever can you do, Mamma?" the princess Eudisia said, trying to be a comfort. "Pappa has left us of his own free will."

"A man does not know what his own free will is until a woman

tells him," the queen replied. "You have much to learn, my daughter."

The royal wizard rose from his place at the high table, a linen napkin tucked beneath his chin, a half-eaten roast quail dripping honey-glaze in his hand. "Your Majesty, I hope you are not considering anything so rash as pursuit," he said. "The terms of King Verran's enchantment were clear: If he went willingly with his first wi — " A deadly look from the queen made him hastily revise his choice of words. " — the recreant liar who *falsely claimed* to be his first wife, then by now he likewise willingly must have kissed her lips. You know what that means."

A shocked silence descended over the banquet hall as the full import of the wizard's words sank in. The guests at the queen's table had been present at the wedding: They knew as well as she what shape King Verran must be in if he had kissed Queen Esmeralda, but no one dared to say it aloud.

Whispers were another story.

"Your daddy's a *frog*." Young Count Providenzo took malicious delight in hissing the taunt in Prince Goffredo's ear.

"He is *not*!" Freddie jumped up, toppling his chair.

"He is *so*!" The moment for whispers was passed. The heads of the whole court turned as one to the disturbance at the children's table. Count Providenzo was only six, and his tutors had not yet schooled him in courtliness, tact, or how to keep one's head attached to one's shoulders when dealing with royalty. All that young Denny knew was that Freddie always beat him badly at marbles, mumblety-peg, and arm-wrestling, and here was his chance to get back some of his own.

"He *was* a frog, and now he's turned back *into* a frog, and he's going to be a frog *forever*, and he's run away with that big old ugly frog-lady to have lots and lots and lots of frog babies, so he doesn't need you to be his son anymore, and he's never coming back, and — "

The count's mother screeched and swooned, the count's father raced forward to sprawl at Annunziata's feet, gibbering for mercy on his son's behalf. Prince Goffredo leaped across the table with a grace and agility that Queen Esmeralda herself might have envied, and punched Count Providenzo in the nose. The other boys joined in the *mêlée* gleefully, and the banquet hall soon reverberated with the sounds of scuffling feet, flailing fists, breaking dishes and glassware, wailing children, and tearing silk-and-satin finery. By the time the queen's guardsmen and the boys'

parents pulled them all apart, they were a raggedy, puff-eyed, bloodstained sight to see. Most of them were grinning like foxes.

Princess Eudisia put her head down in her arms and cried.

Queen Annunziata summoned the major domo of the palace to her side and snapped commands. He stuck his little silver gong of office and announced, "Dessert will be served in the Hall of Tapestries immediately, on pain of death." There was a swiftly ebbing rumble of moving feet and in short order the banquet hall stood empty save for the queen and her wizard, whom she had detained with her own hands.

"What is Your Majesty's pleasure?" the wizard inquired rather nervously.

"My *pleasure* would be to see that frog and her fairy minion thrown into the heart of a burning mountain with weasels attached to their eyes," Annunziata said. "But my *will* is somewhat more practical."

"And that is — ?"

"I *will* have my husband back again, and I *will* accomplish this no matter what the cost."

The royal wizard was horrorstruck at the queen's adamant declaration. "Majesty, I must counsel prudence, and prudence in this case involves acceptance of the inevitable: You cannot hope to win against this foe by the use of main force. Your armies, even if merged with those of Prince Feodor, would soon be rendered impotent. Assuming that you could transport men and mounts through all the perils that bestrew the way between here and the Realm Amphibious, once there they would be utterly defeated. You saw what devastation the froggy horde achieved in Prince Feodor's capital merely by *being* there! We have arms and armor, iron-shod warhorses and gallant hearts, but the frog-queen commands numbers — vast, infinite, mindless numbers that will surely — "

"Oh, shut up," said the queen.

The wizard pursed his mouth. "Very well, Your Majesty," he said. "Have it your way. I suppose that I cannot hope to understand your motivations, being as I am dedicated to celibacy in part-payment for my sorcerous powers. I have heard rumors about the more fleshly joys of connubiality, but I never suspected there were any pleasures of the bedroom worth sacrificing an entire army in a hopeless cause, leaving your kingdom unprotected."

"You think it's *sex* behind this?" the queen asked sharply.

"Well — "

"Well, it's *not*. It's something far more important: It's pride; pride, power, and politics. Today my son confronts another child's teasing over his father's form and fate and it results in a minor tussle, but what of tomorrow? What of when Freddie is king? A monarch's authority must show no chinks, it must stand absolute and inviolable. I will not rest peacefully in the tomb if there is the slightest chance some jumped-up aristo might one day dispute my son's supremacy because his father is a frog."

"But King Verran always *was* a frog!" The wizard protested with the desperate urgency of one who knows at heart that he protests in vain.

"But if we bring him back among us in human form — as we must — and he lives out his days unchanged, then in time the people will forget he ever was associated with that hideous hop-thing. Appearances are nine-tenths of the law." She smiled confidently.

"Your Majesty, I fear — " the wizard began.

"What? That he's kissed that green gargoyle? That he's a frog once more? Pish-tush! You can make a man of him again, can't you?"

"I — I could not promise it. Sometimes a spell is like the cowpox: Once you're over it, it can't touch you a second time."

The queen's right eyebrow lifted dangerously. "Remind me how much I pay you, please," she said. "And why."

The wizard made haste to divert the course of the conversation. "Let us set our minds to first things first, Your Majesty. Whether King Verran is now in frog or human shape, the point is moot unless we can recapture him and bring him home. I have already explicated the problems such a task entails more than once, and I beg you to accede to my counsel that we — "

" — surrender?" The queen laughed. "Oh, my dear wizard, do you know me so very poorly? Surrender is a word solely applied to my enemies. And they will surrender, mark my words, and without my expending so much as a single fighting man in the process."

"Is that so?" The wizard inclined his head and stroked his beard, making himself over into the image of the Sage Counselor. "Your Majesty, I confess that I do not see how that is possible."

Queen Annunziata linked her arm through his. "With love, all things are possible," she told him. "And with magic, even more. Let us retire to your owl-haunted tower and I will describe my plan and what it will require of you. It's quite simple, really, and it's been done already."

"Well, that's a relief, at any rate," the wizard said. "I do prefer working with the classics. I was afraid you were going to ask me to develop an entirely new sort of spell in order to —"

"It's just never been done quite *this* way before."

FROM THE SMALLEST puddle of the Realm Amphibious to the farthest tussock of the Eldritch Marshes, frogs and tadpoles alike rejoiced to welcome home their rightful king. There was no peal of triumphal bells and no dancing in the streets — bells and streets alike being inconsistent with the frogs' customary *modus vivendi* — but the mire throbbed with festal croaking and most citizens could not take two hops without landing in a pile of slaughtered blowflies, the queen's own largesse wherewith her loyal subjects might make merry.

In the gorgeously boggy throneswamp, in the center of the royal pool, King Verran squatted on a golden lily pad with a tiny diadem perched upon his sleek green head, and looked more melancholy than a room full of unpaid public hangmen. Twenty years had passed since his initial transformation, twenty years in which a man's bones might age and the man himself might forget just how uncomfortable a frog's normal posture could be for the out-of-practice. Moreover, the Realm Amphibious was famous for the dampness of its clime. In his happy incumbency as Annunziata's king-consort, Verran had developed a distaste for humidity, for it never failed to infuse a spike of arthritic misery into his bones.

"I thought that when I became a frog I would not still retain so much of my humanity," he grumbled at Esmeralda, who occupied the twin lily pad to his left. "I'm achy and cramped and I can't get used to my eyes being on top of my head and the food does not agree with me at all!"

It was a tiresome variation on the same complaint that Verran had been voicing ever since he'd kissed Esmeralda's lips and broken the spell upon him. The frog-queen drummed the tips of one flipper on her lily pad and sighed. "Verran, my darling, as I keep telling you, you will grow used to it."

"Quite true," the lady Asphodel chimed in. Like the frog-queen, she had reverted to her normal size, namely the diminutive dimensions of a sparrow, and was lolling upon a couch of cattail fluff at the edge of the royal pool, gorging on whortleberries. "Adjustment comes with time." She bit into another whortleberry and smacked her lips. "Stop whining."

"A king does not whine," Queen Esmeralda reproved her winged guest. "It is unseemly." To Verran she said: "Never mind her, my love; you've been under a forgivable strain and have every right to be a little testy. This, too, shall pass. I'm sure that when you first underwent the change it took you a while to grow accustomed to the quirks of life in human form."

"It didn't." Verran snapped out the words with as little ceremony as his courtiers whipped flies from the air with their tongues.

"I am sure you must be mistaken," Queen Esmeralda insisted.

"Well, I'm not. It's been twenty years, but the memory remains undimmed by time: No sooner did Annunziata's lips leave mine and I stood before her manwise but I knew — *I knew*, I tell you! — that *that* was my proper shape."

"Oh Verran, will you utterly destroy me? Will you torment me with such horrid lies?" Queen Esmeralda moaned. She did so very softly, for the wrangling pair was surrounded by the full constituency of the royal entourage. Though frogs possessed no ears worthy of the name (as humans reckoned ears) they still managed to hear well enough and were just as fanatic rumor-mongers as any of Annunziata's court. Thus Queen Esmeralda voiced her most passionate recriminations in the softest tones, murmuring: "Will you persist in breaking my heart?"

"And what of mine?" Verran countered bitterly. "You tore me from my family, and for what? To salve your pride, nothing more. We were betrothed by our parents, Esmeralda: There was no natural affection between us when we wed. We were little better than total strangers to one another when I was whisked away from our marriage feast. You had twenty years to work with: Don't tell me you couldn't have found yourself another husband!"

The frog-queen chose to sidestep confrontation. Instead, she assumed a look of maddening complacency and said: "My darling Verran, you will forget this awkward interlude in our marriage before you know it. Soon

you will find it so natural to squat at the roots of reeds, to gobble mayflies, to hop, to croak, to love me, that you will look back upon your dreary human life as though it were an evil dream. And if not...it will be the worse for you, not me, because here you are and here you'll stay. You might as well make the best of it."

"No, thank you," Verran replied dully. "I chose this fate — I admit it. It matters not that I chose it for Annunziata's sake, to save her kingdom, for it does not change the consequences. I am resigned to suffer them, but I never will enjoy them. Neither will I forget nor regret my former life, no, not for the world."

Queen Esmeralda eyed him coldly. "You did say *former life*?"

"Yes, though the same sentiments apply to my lost love. I will sire you as many tadpoles as you desire, Madam, but I will perform the act as a distasteful necessity."

"As long as you perform," the fairy put in, using a fingertip dipped in berry juice to trace suggestive drawings on the flagstones beside the pool. "The Grand Progress of the Fey begins with the next new moon, and our king and queen will insist upon froglings of royal blood to draw their chariot. It's a long Progress and it will require a lot of royal froglings, so I suggest the two of you get started. Now."

"*Really*." Queen Esmeralda would have blushed had she the ability. "I stand in your debt for favors received, my lady Asphodel, but my gratitude does not extend to bearing such — such lewd remarks."

"Oh, let it go, Esmeralda," Verran said. "Drop the mask of wounded propriety back into the mud where you found it. You wanted me for purposes of procreation, so let's not stand on ceremony but breed. Say the word and I'll accommodate you. Well? Go on. Say it."

The frog-queen was fit to be tied. The air-sac beneath her chin swelled with rancor and her eyes rolled wildly in her head, but she said nothing. Vexation had rendered her speechless.

Verran took this as a fine opportunity to disgorge the spleen engendered by his enforced departure from Annunziata's arms. Grinning as only a frog can, he renewed the attack: "What are you waiting for? You aren't getting any younger, you know. I can sense your eggs growing more age-addled by the minute. Do you expect me to woo you ere I bed you? Think again. I said that I'll do what I must, but only upon direct command,

though I can't imagine quite how you'll phrase it. 'Ready, aim, fire'? It gets the idea across, but it isn't very ladyli — "

"*Silence!*" The frog-queen's shout filled the throneswamp with the full freight of her ire, her frustration, and something entirely unexpected:

A boy.

He flew from her mouth riding the final sibilance of that solitary word. He was no bigger than a watermelon pip when he emerged, but he grew to a height and weight suitable to any healthy nine-year-old before his bare feet splashed into the waters of the royal pool. His cotton shirt and canvas breeches were so serviceable, so humble, and so plain that it took King Verran several heartbeats before he recognized the lad before him.

"Freddie?" he exclaimed. "Freddie, my boy, is it you?"

"Hello, Daddy," Prince Goffredo replied, cheerfully waving at his befrogged father with the large glass jar in his hands.

Queen Esmeralda gasped. "But this is monstrous!" she cried. "Horrible! Untoward! What is the meaning of this unasked invasion? How dare you come into my presence without so much as a by-your-leave? You, the spawn of my worst enemy? Oh, now it will go ill with you, I vow. Guards! Guards! Seize this vile interloper at once and — "

"Shut up!" the lady Asphodel squealed, pounding tiny fists on her cattail couch. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, you fool! Can't you see what you're doing?"

The answer was obvious: No. For had the frog-queen not been in such a heightened and fragile emotional state she would have realized that as each additional word left her lips, it carried in its train another homunculus which, like the pioneering Prince Goffredo, swiftly attained its natural size. The royal pool was soon chockablock with boys, none younger than six nor older than ten, all barefoot, all dressed to confront the muckiest conditions successfully, all of them armed with great and glittering glass jars.

They wasted little time, those smut-faced warriors. With hoots and howls of glee they pounced upon the trembling multitudes attending Queen Esmeralda and popped them into the jars by the fistful. They did not stay their hands even when it looked as if the glass containers could not hold another frog, but defied the laws of physics and stuffed in more.

The results were disappointing as well as deadly to their prisoners, but the boys — being boys — paused only long enough to deplore what they had done, upend the goopy contents, and set about refilling their jars with fresh captives.

"My gracious," King Verran muttered, thoroughly bemused. "I do believe that's little Count Providenzo over there, and that's the Lord Beltranillo and his brother Avispo — the one they're grooming for the Church — and there's the Duke of Testamonte's little boy Clovio! I thought he was still abed with measles. Yoo-hoo, Clovio, are you feeling well enough to go barefoot in the wet like that?" The ducal heir stuck out his tongue at Verran and went back to scooping frogs.

It was a dreadful spectacle, one that might wring tears of sympathy from a tax-collector. Though Esmeralda at last had grasped the fact that her people's doom sprang from her own mouth, the harm was done. The frog-queen's lips were sealed, too late to save the situation, and her compulsory silence actually made things worse. The frogs were an obedient race, devoted to following the orders of their natural rulers to the point where they were unable to take any independent action at all. So they sat where they were and waited for their queen to tell them what to do. They were *still* waiting for a word or direction when the boys grabbed them and jammed them into the jars with the rest of their biddable brethren.

The frog-queen watched in horror until she could bear it no more. "Do something, Asphodel!" she screamed, every word only adding to her problems. "Turn them into fro — I mean, into *something*!"

She might have saved her breath to cool her porridge. The fairy Asphodel was gone, squashed helplessly between layers of captive frogs in Prince Goffredo's personal jar. She pressed her tiny face to the glass, shrieking spells and maledictions, but the transparent surface glowed with the containment charm that Queen Annunziata's wizard had prudently cast over all the boys' collecting jars before sending them on their way.

Alas for Esmeralda, her courtiers, attendants, and guards were soon all gone, imprisoned, trampled, or mashed. The throneswamp was a desert. Some of the boys were holding up their brimming jars for the admiration of their playmates, some were engaged in heated debate over

who had acquired the finest assortment of amphibians, while still others had taken themselves aside to set up impromptu frog-jumping contests which as often as not consisted of the boys jumping on the frogs.

"How can they be so cruel?" the frog-queen groaned, no longer caring that her question brought six fresh despoilers into her kingdom.

"They are not cruel so much as ignorant," Verran replied. "And it doesn't help that they are all children of the aristocracy. Their vision of the universe has but one center, namely their own desires. It isn't pleasant, but it's true. I have tried to correct this flaw in my own children, though judging by young Freddie's deportment...." He shook his head in disappointment over his son's excesses. "I suppose I'd best put a stop to this. Freddie! Freddie, stop that! Put down those frogs this instant!"

At the sound of his father's voice the prince hearkened, but he did not obey. "I'm sorry, Daddy," he said, "but Mummy told us not to stop until we received the — the — um, the uncornidual and complete surrender of the queen."

"That's *unconditional*, my boy," King Verran corrected. "How very like your dear mother." He sighed and turned to the prostrate Esmeralda. "Well?"

"What choice do I have?" the frog-queen sobbed as five more young blue-bloods shot from her mouth and set about harvesting the pitiful few froglings still at liberty. "I give up, I give in, I do hereby surrender and make utter submission to Queen Annunziata. There. Do you think *that* will satisfy the great she-beast?"

"So it would seem," Verran remarked. "Especially since not a single additional boy fell from your mouth once you cried for quarter — though I do think that calling my dear Nuni a great she-beast was rude of you."

"Oh, go jump in the lake!" Queen Esmeralda snapped at him, then did so herself, leaping from her golden lily pad and plunging below the surface of the royal pool.

Sometime during the silence that followed, Queen Annunziata's wizard engaged the long-distance spell to bring King Verran and all the marauding mannikins home.

There was qualified rejoicing throughout the realm when the conquering army returned.

"What do you mean, you can't change him back?" Queen Annunziata demanded, peering over the mage's shoulder while he worked. They were closeted in the topmost turret of the palace where the wizard had his lair and where the sounds of festival in the streets below sounded as faintly as a spider's clog-dance.

The wizard had King Verran seated in the slippery pan of a bronze tripod. From the instant he'd laid hands on Annunziata's consort he had been chanting words of power over him nonstop as well as showering him with pinches of this herb and that powdered mineral willy-nilly. So far the only change he had been able to produce was a fit of uncontrollable sneezing in the still-enfrogged king.

"Majesty, may I remind you that I foresaw this eventuality before we undertook our rescue mission?" he said, his temper frayed and raveling. "If spells could be cast on and off like cloaks it would lead to shuttlecock sorcery, a single curse volleying back and forth between two wizards until the poor thing burst and scattered wild magic broadcast over all the land. It simply would not do."

"Bah! The worst incompetents always have the best excuses. Give him here." Without waiting for the wizard to comply, Queen Annunziata snatched her husband from the tripod and pressed him to her bosom. "I made a man of him once and I can do it again." She kissed the frog.

Nothing happened.

"Verran, are you *trying* to annoy me?" Annunziata asked.

"No, my love," said the frog.

"Then why don't you change back?"

"I would if I could. I don't like this any more than you do."

"I don't believe you! I think you're glad to be a frog! I think you never wanted to be human! I think you're just being stubborn and uncooperative because you don't love me anymore and you're using this as a way to wriggle out of our marriage!" Tears rolled down her cheeks, streaking her rice powder and rouge. "It's my age, isn't it? You want a younger wife, even if she is just a green girl."

King Verran sighed and laid both front flippers on Annunziata's still-firm breasts. "Beloved wife, listen to yourself: It is not that you no longer please me, but that *I* no longer please you. Not in this shape, at least." He pushed free of her hands and plopped to the floor of the wizard's chamber.

He lolloped as far as the doorway, where he paused and proclaimed from the sill: "Farewell, Annunziata! Since the sight of me has grown foul to you, I vow that I will vanish from your kingdom and your ken. I leave you free to find a mate more pleasing to the eye, for it becomes plain to me that the eye alone is the seat of your affection. Be happy."

He turned to bound down the spiral stairs, but he had not taken a single hop before a great glass vessel dropped over him, sealing him within water-clear walls. Queen Annunziata swept him up, glass and all, and hugged him close. "Oh Verran, never leave me!" she exclaimed. "Be frog or man or monster, but be mine, and pardon me for my foolishness. Love is not love which something-something-something about making alterations. You are my king, now and always. I care nothing for what others might make of this. Woe to the wagging tongue that dares to scorn you for your shape where *I* can hear of it! It will soon lie still within a severed head. Say you will stay! Say you forgive me!"

The frog hauled himself out of the jar and, like some bold explorer, scaled the snowy vastness of Annunziata's impressive promontory. "Of course I will," he said, nestling down happily. "How can I do otherwise? I love you."

"And I you," she replied, "in this or any other form. And love is truly the greatest magic of them all." With that, she tucked her chin as low as it could go and kissed him once more.

This time, something did happen.

IT IS WRITTEN in the annals of Good King Goffredo's reign that the love between his parents conquered an evil spell laid upon his father's head not once, but twice. The records go on to say that soon after King Verran's second disenchantment, he found the strains of court life wearisome and trying, and so retired to the countryside, to enjoy the rest of his days in bucolic serenity, in a modest manor with an ample lily pond on the premises. His adoring wife, the queen, remained behind to govern her realm only until young Goffredo was of an age and acuity to hold his throne unaided against all comers. Being famed for her virtue and love of seemliness, she spent these last few years of public service in demure seclusion, giving her orders unseen from a veiled throne. Once her son

assumed the crown, she joined her husband in his rustic retreat. There they passed many a dulcet day, to the great edification of the local poets, and there in time they died.

So the annals say.

There is a *post mortem* footnote in the annals remarking in detail upon the miniature size of the coffins that enclosed them and brought them to the capital for interment. There is another concerning the dandiprat daintiness of their tombs.

There is a third concerning the doom of the ill-advised chronicler who inserted those parenthetical observations. (In this, as in many things, Good King Goffredo took after his revered mother.) It is most instructive of many things, but chiefly this:

A closed mouth gathers no frog.



COMING ATTRACTIONS

ACCORDING TO OUR SCHEDULE, the April 2001 issue will lead off with "Have Not Have." This story takes a look at one of China's more remote regions as it appears just before the entire world gains the capacity to go online...through the air. The story comes to us from British writer Geoff Ryman, and it's a good one.

Also slated for next month is Nancy Etchemendy's "Demolition," a dark fantasy that might not be the best story to share with anyone who has recently had their house remodeled—but it's great reading for anyone who considers an examined life to be worth living.

Next month also promises to bring a new science column (reports of its death were somewhat exaggerated), along with our usual film and book reviews. Our forecast also includes new stories from names familiar and new, such as Richard Bowes, Michael Cadnum, Albert E. Cowdrey, July Lewis, John Morressy, Carrie Richerson, Robert Sheckley, and Allen Steele. Make sure your subscription is current so you won't miss any of the goodies.

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CURIOSITIES

PASSING FOR HUMAN,

BY JODY SCOTT (1977)



PLOY older than *Gulliver*, although Swift made the approach an adjective: protagonist comes to alien world whose natives and absurdities are of course not at all "alien" but refractive of the human condition. The tilt of alien perspective however enables the insanity of that condition, perceived by a faux-naïf, to be the more clearly perceived.

Scott's Benaroya, researching, takes on the body of an attractive Terran female — wildly attractive, I should say, much of the plot keys on responses to "her" breasts — and explores 1970's California. Aren't these humans quaint! They actually believe that accumulation of these silly goods differentiates them! They want to hurt one another! They are obsessed by procreation, so cunningly objectified in their vehicles of transport!

Benaroya, expanding her mission, experiments with time travel and finds Lincoln, Woolf, Heidi, to be no less insane. Mixture of fictional and "real" characters? Humans, those pitiful creatures, get all hung up on the need to compartmentalize.

This is the greatest employment of science fiction in the service of satire; we've had notable satirists — but Scott alone refuses to sentimentalize.

Scott published a severely cut version of her first novel *Down Will Come Baby* (never appeared in book form) in the 7/68 *Escapade*, and a third novel, *I, Vampire*, appeared in 1980. A scattering of short stories in the science fiction magazines, "The Two-D Problem" and "Go for Baroque" were in here in the mid-sixties.

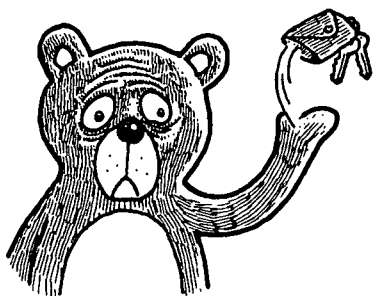
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— Barry N. Malzberg

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